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THE DYNAMICS OF SHOP STEWARD ORGANISATION, ACTIVITY
AND CONSCIOUSNESS

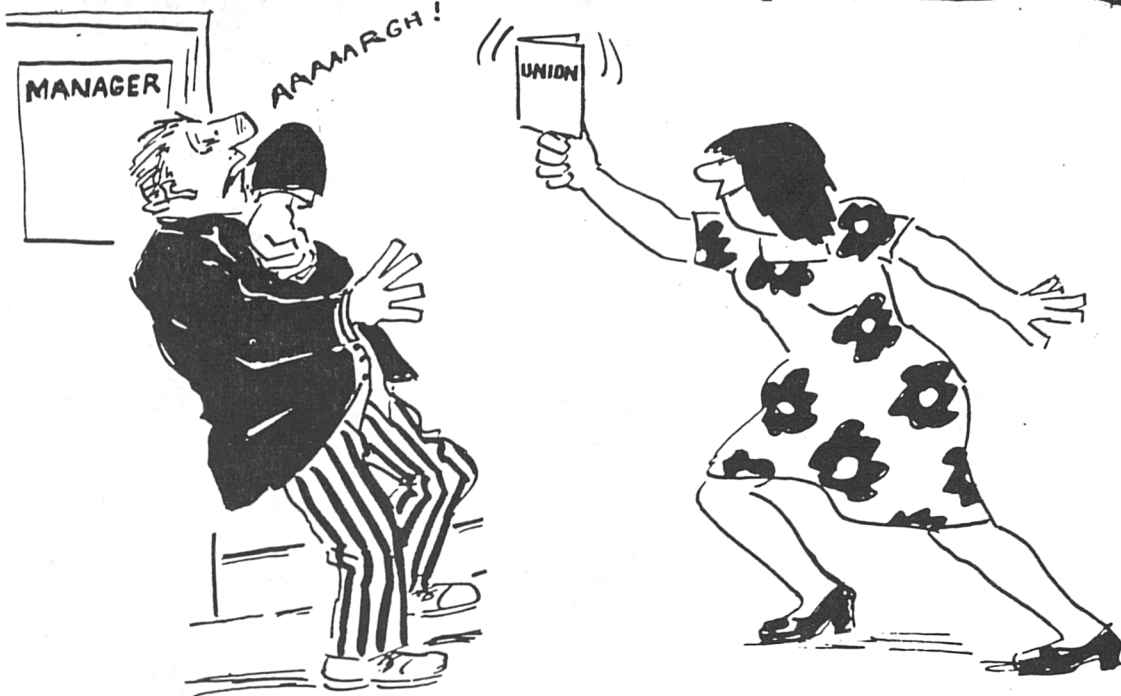
The Experience of Three Merseyside Manufacturing Plants
Between The Late 1960s And Early 1990s.

Ralph Darlington. PhD Thesis. August 1991.

School of Industrial and Business Studies/Department of
Sociology.

University of Warwick.

SHOP STEWARDS



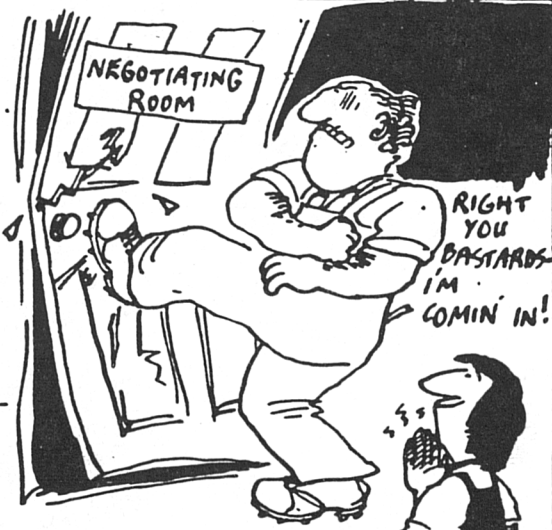
OUR NORMAN



PLEASED TO MEET YOU
NORM - I'M YOUR
FRIENDLY SHOP
STEWARD - ARNOLD..



IT'S MY FUNCTION TO CONVEY
TO MANAGEMENT THE POINT
OF VIEW OF THE MEN, WHICH
SAID PROCEDURE IS BEST
EFFECTED USING TRADITIONAL
COLLECTIVE BARGAINING
TECHNIQUES... AS YOU WILL
SEE...



ABSTRACT

Empirical case study analysis of shop steward organisation within three specific manufacturing plants in Merseyside has been conducted with the aim of contributing to an understanding of the dynamics of steward organisation, activity and consciousness within British manufacturing industry more generally. This involves not merely a snap-shot of contemporary developments but an historical overview of the past 20 years that will be of relevance to an understanding of potential future trends. Methods of data collection include extensive interviews - with shop stewards, union members, managers and full-time union officials - analysis of documentary evidence and personal observation. The research is informed by a Marxist analytical framework, namely that there is a contradiction in the nature of workplace trade unionism - between conflict and accommodation in stewards' relationship to management, between democracy and bureaucracy in stewards' relationship to rank and file members and between independence and dependence in stewards' relationship to full-time union officials. Because the balance struck between these interrelated and overlapping tendencies varies, depending on the level of workers' confidence, activity and militancy vis-a-vis management, an evaluation is made of the different 'micro-level' factors which affect the balance of bargaining power in each workplace and of the way these are located within the much broader 'macro-level' social, economic and political context of the changing balance of class forces in society, with a contrast being drawn between the broad upturn in workers' struggles during the 1970s and the downturn of the 1980s. A central concern is a critique of Eric Batstone's 'strong bargaining relations' model of pragmatic shop steward organisation, which, as the case studies illustrate, merely serves to reinforce the limitations and compromises of workplace trade unionism within capitalist society. The distinctive potential role of revolutionary socialist organisation and leadership is posed as a vital missing element.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis could not have been written without the influence and support of a variety of people. My initial enthusiasm for the project was kindled many years ago when as an active trade unionist I first read Huw Beynon's 'Working For Ford', a penetrating account of shopfloor workers' struggles and of the limitations and potential of factory based shop steward organisation. Richard Hyman has provided extremely insightful Marxist theoretical analysis of workplace trade unionism which I have unashamedly adopted for my own research purposes, albeit 'biting the hand that feeds me' by attempting to develop a critical assessment of his later work. I am extremely grateful to both Hyman and Tony Elger, my PhD co-supervisors, for reading and re-reading drafts of the manuscript over the three years it took to complete, consistently offering helpful comments on the content and forcing me to defend, alter and elaborate my views on the subject. Pat Egan was also of great help, allowing me to stay overnight in his flat in Coventry on numerous occasions and regularly taking the trouble to discuss various themes and arguments with me late into the night. Of course, I would like to particularly thank all the interviewees from the three factories who shared their experiences and understanding of events with me, helping the thesis to 'come alive'. Needless to say any errors of fact or of interpretation are mine. I owe a general debt to my comrades in the Socialist Workers Party whose political understanding and practical commitment kept me going. The thesis is dedicated to assisting the struggles of workers against management everywhere and hopefully it will

make some contribution towards the building of a revolutionary socialist party inside the British labour movement. Finally, I owe a very special debt of gratitude to my partner and companion, Carole Donovan, for allowing me to read out loud to her virtually the entire draft and offering her comments, putting up with my enforced isolation crouched over a word processor for so long whilst I actually got the thesis written, and generally providing me with a tremendous amount of emotional and loving support.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s a consensus developed among many commentators that the powerful shop steward organisation built up in some key sectors of British manufacturing industry during the 1960s and 1970s had been considerably weakened. The hostile economic and political climate of Conservative rule had sapped shopfloor militancy, eroded stewards' power and brought dramatic changes in working practices. Some argued that although shop stewards continued to operate using formal bargaining procedures they had become increasingly marginal to managerial concerns in many companies (Chadwick, 1983). Yet not everybody agreed on the nature or depth of the weakness of shop steward power. A number of contributors, notably Eric Batstone, maintained that whilst it would be mistaken to believe stewards had not experienced some reduction in their power and influence the extent of the decline was often widely exaggerated (1986b). Both in terms of the formal institutional aspects of workplace trade unionism and in terms of substantive measures of the power of shop stewards what was striking was the stability of workplace industrial relations rather than its transformation during the 1980s. Stewards continued to do much the same job as before, 'nothing much had changed'.

Of course, there were differences in approach and emphasis both between each of these two camps and within them, notably over the most appropriate research method (surveys and/or case studies) and criteria for measuring shop steward strength (organisation and/or

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substantive indices) as well as over the significance of cyclical trends and corporate, sectoral, and regional variations (Terry, 1986a). Nonetheless, contributors from both perspectives (with some exceptions, including Fairbrother: 1987b, 1988, 1989 and Spencer: 1987, 1989) drew similar practical conclusions about what constituted the most effective model of workplace trade unionism within the rapidly changing climate, ranging from Brown's 'enterprise unionism' (1983) and Batstone's 'sophisticated shop steward organisation' (1986) to Jones and Rose's 'pragmatic trade unionism' (1986). Essentially, they argued shop stewards' reliance on the actions and approach of yesteryear - with its old fashioned principles of collective solidarity, strikes and picket lines - was counter-productive; militant workplace trade unionism as traditionally conceived had become increasingly outmoded. Instead, they heralded the new brand of 'moderate' shop steward who was not restricted in the range of compromises they were prepared to accept in the form of flexible bargaining over changes in employment and work. The impact of a renewed economic recession in the early 1990s merely served to reinforce the apparent potency of such 'new realist' notions.

Unfortunately, many contributors tended to conflate the empirical evidence uncovered with the model of workplace trade unionism they themselves theoretically championed - without drawing out the linkages and disjuncture between the two. Moreover, often the underlying theoretical assumptions and analytical premises that shaped their interpretation were only stated implicitly. Whilst providing a mountain of factual data about what shop stewards actually do - in terms of the conduct of collective bargaining and stewards' functions, activities and attitudes - most offered

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no adequate conceptualisation of the social dynamics of the shop stewards' role or general theory of the underlying factors which determine shop steward behaviour.

In the light of such considerations, my research has three main complementary objectives. Firstly, to conduct empirical case study analysis of shop steward organisation within three specific manufacturing plants in Merseyside with the aim of contributing to an understanding of the changing state of workplace trade union organisation in British manufacturing industry more generally, offering not merely a snap-shot of contemporary developments but an historical overview of the past 20 years that will be of relevance to understanding potential future trends. Secondly, to deepen a theoretical and empirical understanding of the essential features of the dynamic nature of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness, exploring the various factors that influence the balance of bargaining power in the workplace and locating these within their broader economic, social and political context. Thirdly, to make the focus of my research a critique of the work of Eric Batstone, a foremost contributor to the analysis of the role of shop stewards in relation to workplace leadership and organisation, whose 'Shop Stewards In Action' (1977) and subsequent studies were widely acclaimed as establishing a new way of looking at shop steward organisation and behaviour which has continued to be highly influential in workplace industrial relations research.

Unlike many others, Batstone did explore the social dynamics of the stewards' role (1977, 1978). He rejected the traditional structural emphasis in favour of a more interactive and processual approach

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which concentrated on the nature of goals pursued, the patterns of action and interaction which developed and the meaning and values attached to such processes. Moreover, he attempted to make explicit a theoretical vantage point of analysis, namely that of right-wing Labourism, an unequivocal reformist workplace trade unionism. It will be my contention that despite useful, although partial, insights his analytical approach and political assumptions contained considerable flaws. In essence, my aim is to put Batstone's notion of 'sophisticated' shop steward organisation to the test of empirical research through the prism of an alternative Marxist analytical framework, whilst evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of alternative militant shop stewards' strategies. Focussing attention on Batstone's model of 'moderate' workplace trade unionism can be justified not merely because of the pivotal contribution his analysis has made to the study of shop stewards, but because it also helps illuminate some of the limits and potential of his more 'radical' critics including Richard Hyman, Huw Beynon, Michael Terry, Peter Fairbrother and Bruce Spencer. Moreover, it provides an extremely useful basis from which to explore the dilemmas of workplace trade unionism within a capitalist political economy, the dialectical relationship between shopfloor organisation, activity and consciousness, and the distinctive role an alternative socialist political leadership can (potentially) play within the workplace.

From the outset it is necessary to state that this thesis has been written not simply within the general framework of a revolutionary Marxist approach but also within the overall perspective of the Socialist Workers Party and is devoted to assisting those engaged in the battle to advance the struggles of workers against employers. Such partisan motives

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might be regarded as academically somewhat disreputable. No doubt to consider how shop stewards might build up the strength of workplace union organisation by challenging the structure of managerial control is to display an 'irresponsible bias' which ironically is not noticed in managerially orientated studies (Hyman, 1989c). Notwithstanding such incongruity, my attempt to link theoretical, methodological and policy perspectives will, naturally enough, be open to critical scrutiny from alternative approaches, not only by students of industrial relations but also by management and trade union front-line practitioners 'in the field'.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: Chapter One considers the dynamics of shop steward organisation by means of a critique of the work of Eric Batstone and an outline of my own analytical framework, background hypothesis and research methodology. Chapters Two, Three and Four present the results of my empirical case study research into shop steward organisations' in three Merseyside manufacturing plants. Chapter Five contains a comparative analysis of recurring themes within the research material and draws some general lessons in light of Batstone's competing approach.

CHAPTER ONE: THE DYNAMICS OF SHOP STEWARD ORGANISATION
ACTIVITY AND CONSCIOUSNESS

CHAPTER ONE: THE DYNAMICS OF SHOP STEWARD ORGANISATION, ACTIVITY AND
CONSCIOUSNESS

INTRODUCTION

In this Chapter I subject Eric Batstone's social democratic analysis of the dynamics of shop steward organisation to critique; outline an alternative Marxist analytical framework from which to examine stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and union officials; provide a general background hypothesis about the various factors affecting the balance of bargaining power and its affect on the nature of steward organisation; and indicate the research strategy, technique and methodology underpinning my empirical case study analysis.

CRITIQUE OF ERIC BATSTONE

Batstone's survey evidence provided some justification for assuming that the basic institutions of shop steward organisation remained fundamentally intact during the 1980s (1988b). In this respect, his stress on the continuity rather than change in workplace industrial relations - with the notion that 'nothing much had changed' - had the merit

of refuting some of the more pessimistic assessments provided by many other commentators. Nonetheless, there appears little doubt the self-confidence of shop steward organisation has been severely undermined during the last decade or more. Unfortunately, an adequate evaluation of this contradictory phenomenon is hampered by Batstone's analytical framework and political set of assumptions. This is not to imply the procedural and substantive indices of shop steward power and influence he utilised were worthless. On the contrary, if we want to talk about the balance of power, either in the workplace or in society, then we have to use the indicators and measures that are on hand. Batstone provided some extremely useful, if partial, insights into the strengths and weaknesses of workplace union organisation. However, it is necessary to bear in mind all such indices are open to wide-ranging interpretation depending upon the analytical vantage point of the observer. Arguably, Batstone's reformist prism of analysis not only blinkered his assessment of such measures but also provided a misrepresented analysis of the dynamics of shop steward organisation more generally.

Despite the multi-faceted nature of Batstone's contribution to the analysis of workplace trade unionism it is useful to identify two distinct components which highlight the overarching themes of his notion of steward 'sophistication', namely the emphasis placed on the key role played by 'leader' stewards and the 'strong bargaining relationship' they establish with management. Both of these elements can be explored in more detail.

Firstly, Batstone (et, al. 1977, 1978) was concerned with the institutional, organisational and ideological features of the work

situation which encouraged shop steward leadership and its consequences for the dynamics of workplace industrial relations. At the heart of his analysis was the notion of a 'sophisticated' shop steward organisation, a centralised organisational structure which has the resources to take into account the interests of union members as a whole, co-ordinating the activities of sectional groups, and formulating the most cost-effective strategy in the light of the union's relative power position. The focus of attention was placed on the relatively small number of 'leader' stewards - referred to as the 'quasi-elite' - a centralised body of stewards who act in a 'representative' role on behalf of a fragmented and sectionalised membership. Such 'leader' stewards have close informal contacts with management and are able to improve their members' conditions through pragmatic bargaining, having little need to resort to strike action or risky confrontations; through their network of relations with members and the 'mobilisation of bias' 'leader' stewards exercise a decisive degree of power and influence both within the stewards' body and over a volatile union membership. They seek to shape a strategic plant-wide perspective supportive of 'trade union principles' of unity and collectivism. Other, less centrally positioned, 'populist' stewards were also identified by Batstone. Possessing tenuous contacts with management 'populist' stewards lack sophisticated bargaining awareness and are more susceptible to managerial attempts to gain the advantage; without firm links with their members they confine themselves to a 'mouthpiece' (populist) role, placing greater emphasis on the pursuit of sectional interests, and are more likely to adopt the militant strike tactic to advance the 'frontier of control'.

Secondly, Batstone focussed on what he termed stewards' 'strong bargaining relations' with management. Whilst acknowledging a basic conflict of interest between employers and workers Batstone did not believe this represented a fundamental antagonism; such conflicting goals were compatible with and dependent upon some form of accommodation. Not losing sight of the fact that a rational calculation of advantage in a context of power relations was always at stake there was an assumption that conflict could be resolved through compromise and concession within a mature system of workplace bargaining which both sides would find acceptable and mutually advantageous. Batstone emphasised how both shop stewards and managers tended to press for their own competitive advantage in such a way that no group was completely dominant or able to have their own way on every occasion. Instead, there was often something approximating a rough balance of power. 'Strong bargaining relations' involved 'leader' stewards in close contact with managers, adopting a tough but cautious bargaining approach of give-and-take, a process of marginal incremental adjustment that maintained a more or less stable equilibrium within a generally agreed framework of rules and procedures, both formal and informal.

From such a vantage point, collective bargaining was valued not only as a means of resolving conflict but as an end in itself. Shop stewards and their members would lose more by adopting an aggressive militant approach to management than they could possibly achieve through pragmatic bargaining. A frontal challenge to the existing framework of power and control would only be possible at disproportionate cost to themselves. Therefore, Batstone accepted as natural and inevitable that

stewards should pursue restricted (and hence readily negotiable) objectives. It was a right-wing Labourist conception of workplace trade unionism par excellence.

In making a critical assessment of Batstone's conception of 'sophisticated' shop steward organisation it is necessary to examine some of the key concepts he utilised, namely 'power', 'strong bargaining relations', 'interests', 'leadership' and 'bureaucracy'. An initial point to make is that Batstone was primarily interested in the exercise of power where it could be readily 'observed', concentrating his focus on decision making within the shop stewards' body and stewards' bargaining relationship with management. Whilst this highlighted the uneven distribution of power and influence that exists within steward organisation it tended to segregate workplace industrial relations as an arena of analysis from the broader social context within which it unfolds, thereby providing only a partial, one-dimensional picture. Thus, Batstone took the existence of shop stewards 'action' (their ideas, beliefs and goals) as given rather than attempting to explain their source and origin (at least beyond specific organisational and institutional factors within the workplace) to the underlying social 'structure' and relations of production within capitalist society. He took for granted an existing system of workplace relations where shop stewards are motivated to act in terms of social norms which serve to generate their commitment to rules which do not seriously obstruct managerial objectives.

Arguably, Batstone takes for granted as given the substantive inequality of power and rewards that results from the command of the economy by capital and which structures the whole agenda of

collective bargaining in a manner conducive to employers' interests. Yet it is clear that the 'frontier of control' in the workplace is necessarily conditional precisely because it operates within an economic and structural context which can be expected to persist only so long as an employer is able to extract an acceptable level of profit from workers' labour. Not only does control over higher-level policies and decisions set rigorous limits to workplace controls but the employers and the state are in a position to use their immense economic and social power to threaten the very security and survival of shop steward organisation that does not agree to work by the 'rules of the game'. Playing the rules of the game means not pressing demands 'too far' or directly challenging the 'rights of capital' but accepting the compromises of capitalist economic and political logic. At the same time, stewards' subjective 'meanings' are systematically influenced by the capitalist class in its interest of maintaining control over the structure of society through the exploitation of labour.

Thus, it is because shop stewards are faced with these broader material and ideological pressures - and not just organisational factors within the workplace - that they are encouraged to engage in 'strong bargaining relations' with management. Yet this should be interpreted as an accommodation to external power. Therefore, it becomes possible to see why Batstone's underlying assumption of convergent and reconcilable interests between shop stewards and managers obtained through mutually advantageous trade-offs is flawed. Of course, 'strong bargaining relations' may achieve some limited concrete gains for sections of workers but the scope for such give-and-take bargaining is strictly circumscribed by the structural context of capitalist social relations. It is conditional

on company and/or capitalist stability in which there is considerable margin available for employers to make concessions to workers. Yet competitive pressures and/or economic recession are not necessarily an opportune context for the orderly accommodation of opposing interests. Indeed, in such conditions, social and economic antagonisms are often sharpened and the processs of give-and-take can become manifestly zero (or even negative) sum. (Hyman: 1989a, p87)

A related problem with Batstone's focus on stewards' bargaining power is that it failed to take adequate account of the way many of the most important limitations on managerial preogative derive not from the bargaining skills of shop stewards but from the activity of rank and file workers themselves. Of course, the power of workplace union organisation is built through effective steward negotiation but at the end of the day it comes from what rank and file workers are prepared to do collectively to set limits to the power of management. Stewards have little else to fall back on the when the crunch comes. The 'frontier of control' constantly shifts as the determination not to have their conditions of work entirely dictated to them constantly expresses itself in workers' struggles to establish some element of counter-control. In this sense, the power of workplace union organisation is not the personal property of the steward(s). It only really comes from the daily shopfloor struggle over pay and conditions, sometimes led by shop stewards, but often organised independently of their initiative. Arguably, it is these shopfloor controls which are the basis upon which real material improvements in workers' position are achieved. In other words, what determines whether the level of workers' exploitation is driven up or not is the level of workers'

resistance and confidence to fight.

Because Batstone conceived conflict between workers and managers as narrowly bound within workplace institutional forms, he made a sharp distinction between what he appeared to regard as workers' 'realistic' subjective interests - that arise from their lived experiences of work - as opposed to so-called unrealistic objective 'radical' interests, which might challenge the capitalist system (although it is ironic that whilst acknowledging the material situation and ideological influence of 'leader' stewards makes workers' subjectively expressed interests ambivalent Batstone did not clarify his definition of interests.) Yet this is a false dichotomy that fails to take account of the fact that both employers and workers are forced to act in certain ways with contradictory and antagonistic interests, irrespective of what they may consciously articulate at any point in time. Batstone's overall starting point of analysis - the specific work situation - is in complete contrast to Marx's own parameter of the totality of class relations in society. Thus, Marx's evidence for a 'class in itself', generating conflict and giving the working class objective interests, can only be understood if the nature of the inter-capitalist competition external to the workplace is taken into consideration. In order to remain competitive, employers are forced to attack workers' living standards, thereby demonstrating that their interests - profit - fundamentally conflict with workers. Equally, workers are often driven to take strike action to defend their wages and conditions precisely because employers refuse to satisfy their basic aspirations and needs. Batstone did not recognise how immediate forms of workers' struggle and consciousness can actually seek to embody - in

however fragmentary and partial forms - 'radical' needs which cannot be met within exploitative relations of production and which as a result can lead workers to consciously act on those 'objective' interests. In this sense, workers' activity within capitalism shows the potential for transcending capitalist production relations (notwithstanding the very real obstacles involved).

Significantly, Batstone tended to treat 'leadership' as a generalised property of certain stewards rather than as a pattern of behaviour all stewards adopt in dealing with particular issues in certain situations. He identified two distinguishing features of a 'leader' steward - namely, their 'representative' role in relation to members (as opposed to populist) and their commitment to 'trade union principles' of collectivism (rather than sectionalism) (Batstone et al. 1977. pp23-53). The problem with such a characterisation is the assumption that 'leadership' is essentially a one-way relationship between ('leader') shop stewards and their members. Although he acknowledged the influence of other key figures on the shopfloor who transmit their concerns upwards (namely, the 'opinion-leader' and 'griever') Batstone saw the 'leader' steward as pivotal in amending and squashing issues, and knowing what was 'best' for the members. But this conception simplifies and underestimates the complexities involved in what is a dynamic interaction. Of course, day-to-day experience of shopfloor conflict and bargaining with management can help shop stewards to develop distinctive insights into workplace industrial relations. Moreover, steward organisation provides crucial resources and support for stewards to develop and test their perspectives. Nonetheless, although they retain a degree of autonomy from the rank and file, stewards are under constant

pressure not to become too isolated from the practical needs of their members and in order not to face a challenge to their position they are often forced to respond to rank and file demands.

In other words, the 'leadership' relationship is a two-way interaction between the rank and file and shop stewards, between day-to-day resistance to management and building effective trade union organisation. It involves stewards both sharing their experience and being responsive to their immediate interests whilst simultaneously 'giving a lead' and transcending their limitations. In fact, internal factional conflict amongst 'leader' stewards concerns in part, arguments about what this involves, reflecting differing currents of concern and activity among the rank and file. On this basis, it would be an oversimplification to term a shop steward either a 'leader' or a 'populist'; stewards may behave differently in varying situations and circumstances - depending on the issue and the work group involved, the strength of rank and file confidence, management's strategy, the role of union officials, etc - and simple typologies cannot deal with this. Batstone's distinction between 'leaders' and 'populists' is far too sharply polarised, exaggerating the difference between the roles. In practice, stewards usually display characteristics from both poles, although the balance may vary.

Nichols and Beynon's description (1977) of the ChemCo shop stewards, Alfie and Greg, showed how Batstone's distinction between 'leader' and 'populist' is too overdrawn. Alfie is a shop steward, active in the union and committed to trade union principles. Using Batstone's term he is a 'leader' steward in that he has 'strong bargaining relations' with management and a 'representative' role in relation to his members. At the

same time however, contradicting Batstone's characterisation, he has little contact with his members over whom he has little influence. Because he is not willing to commit himself sufficiently militantly to rank and file grievances his members think he is too soft with management, and withhold their loyalty because of his inability to achieve satisfactory improvements in working conditions. By contrast, Greg is a shop steward, not active in the union, but committed to 'trade union principles'. Using Batstone's terms he is more inclined to act as a 'populist' in that he does not have close links with management and because he takes up and militantly pursues sectional rank and file grievances. Yet, in contradiction to Batstone's characterisation, Greg, because of his willingness to represent the rank and file, has good contacts with his members who provide him with their loyal support. Moreover, not only is he able to successfully deliver real improvements but he also attempts to bridge the day-to-day sectional concerns of his members with a longer-term strategy aimed at building up strong collective plant-wide union organisation.

Again, Batstone's definition of 'trade union principles' in terms of generalised subjective value concepts such as 'justice' and 'fairness' cannot be easily related to the specific actions or policies adopted by shop stewards. The precise manner in which union principles may be operationalised can vary. By way of example, take the issue of sectionalism. Batstone's framework assumed that not only were 'trade union principles' and sectional interests incongruent but that left to themselves the members tend to pursue only sectional interests; it requires 'leader' shop stewards to mobilise collective responses and behaviour on the shopfloor by encouraging sentiments of solidarity.

Undoubtedly, there is an uncertain relationship between the immediate day-to-day grievances of rank and file members and the desire of shop stewards to provide a long-term strategy to protect the interests of all workers across the plant. Nonetheless, sectional interests and collective attitudes are not necessarily incompatible. Often rank and file members may have immediate sectional grievances which are potentially directly relevant to other workers in the plant (and the working class generally) but which are blocked by shop stewards' narrow organisational interests of not upsetting stable relations with management. For example, the victory of a sectional strike to resist changed working practices could help boost the strength of union organisation in every section of a factory. However, if stewards utilised so-called 'trade union principles' (in the way Batstone envisaged) to argue against the sectional walk-out and to prevent it spreading, it could amount to a self-defeating policy of weakening union organisation generally. Certainly, there is a problem in terms of what 'trade union principles' actually mean and Batstone's fleeting recognition of the existence of 'hard-liners' within the quasi-elite of 'leader' senior stewards (who hold a militant perspective) illustrates how it is possible to have quite different assessments of the cost-benefits involved in workplace union activity (Batstone et al. 1977. p89). Nichols and Beynon's study (1977) provided an example of an alternative type of shop steward role in the application of 'trade union principles'. Greg represents the type of steward who recognises both the strengths and weaknesses of sectional rank and file activity and attempts to accentuate the positive and downplay the negative. Crucially, this involves making a conscious effort to build up the level of organisation

and consciousness of shopfloor workers to fight management, rather than engaging in backroom compromise deals (even though in the absence of a wider group of stewards he is not able to get very far). In other words, 'trade union principles' is rather an omnibus category under which a variety of styles or strategies could be adopted.

Batstone's typology also did not allow for the impact which management may have through promoting the stewards' role as part of the formalisation of workplace industrial relations (Willman, 1981). Thus, steward organisations may display quite different policy characteristics depending on the degree to which they are 'independent' or 'management sponsored'. Using Batstone's typology one could conceive both types of steward organisation as having both 'leaders' and 'populists'. Yet ironically, it would be impossible to distinguish them in terms of the policies pursued because such a vague definition does not allow it. This highlights the inherent ambiguity of Batstone's framework. For example, at the 'ChemCo' plant studied by Beynon and Nichol (1977) there was no coherent 'quasi elite'. Crucially, it is necessary to take account of the contrasting traditions of accountability and forms of membership contact characteristic of different steward organisations, something which Batstone's framework merely obscures.

Unfortunately, Batstone refused to acknowledge how the tendencies towards hierarchy, centralisation and bureaucratisation within steward organisation - particularly among senior stewards - can lead to a divergence of perspective and interest between stewards and members. He insisted such features existed prior to the Donovan reforms and were not noticeably enhanced during the 1970s. Yet Batstone's interpretation of

survey data was based on a set of theoretical assumptions about 'sophisticated' steward 'leadership' which clearly did not see rank and file members as absolutely central to workplace union organisation. Instead, he effectively looked at steward organisation through the prism of the 'quasi-elite' and developed a theory derived from and for the 'quasi-elite', a 'top down' view of stewards relationship to the members. From this vantage point, the key to 'sophisticated' union organisation is 'leader' stewards' bargaining expertise and contacts with management. Rank and file members are viewed as essentially passive agents whom stewards might occasionally mobilise into activity but merely as a bargaining lever against management, ensuring any independent initiative is strictly controlled. Yet arguably, such a view of the relationship between stewards and members is a recipe for a weak and 'bureaucratised' workplace union organisation. It can be contrasted with a 'bottom up' attempt by stewards to not merely act on their members' behalf but to encourage them to act for themselves. From this vantage point, rank and file self-activity, the collective participation and involvement of members in decision making, and their collective mobilisation through struggle against management, is the key to building strong shop steward organisation. Only when such contrasting interpretations of workplace union democracy are taken into consideration is it possible to evaluate the significance of various measures of steward 'bureaucratisation' such as 100 per cent time-off work, the contesting of stewards' positions, their tenure of office and so on.

To further illustrate the limitations of Batstone's notion of 'sophisticated' shop steward organisation it is necessary to

outline an alternative Marxist analytical framework from which to examine the dynamics of workplace trade unionism.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Trade unions are profoundly contradictory institutions, struggling both against capitalism and within it. On the one hand, they are the means whereby the working class begins to organise and act independently as a class to combat capitalist exploitation. They mobilise workers' collective strength and stop the employers riding roughshod over them. Through their experience of trade union struggle workers can develop the confidence, organisation and political consciousness necessary to overthrow capitalism and establish socialism. As Engels [1974] commented, as schools of war the unions are unexcelled. On the other hand, trade unions operate within the framework of capitalism. They seek not to overthrow, but to improve workers' position within the existing system and are concerned with improving the terms on which labour power is exploited, not with ending that exploitation. As Marx [1970a] commented they deal with effects, not with the causes of these effects.

The self-limiting nature of trade unionism manifests itself in three related ways (Cliff and Gluckstein, 1986). Firstly, there is the problem of sectionalism. Thus, whilst uniting workers into distinct groups 'trade unions', as the name implies, separate them from workers in other unions through the different wages, conditions and traditions

pertaining in different industries. The geography of trade unionism matches the geography of capitalism. Secondly, there is a separation of economics and politics. Trade union leaders push the notion that for political change workers must look to the Labour Party, while the trade unions mainly confine themselves to the narrow horizon of economic issues, such as wage and conditions. This false divide is used to prevent workers mobilising their vast potential industrial strength against the power of the capitalist class concentrated in the state and reinforces the politics of reformism - of negotiating piecemeal improvements in workers' conditions through collective bargaining and parliament rather than fighting for the revolutionary transformation of society through militant class struggle. Thirdly, because trade unions limit their horizons to those set by capitalism, every struggle, however militant, must end up in a compromise and it is this situation which gives rise to a permanent apparatus of full-time trade union officials - constituting a distinct social layer privileged in income, working conditions and lifestyle with interests different from and contrary to those of rank and file union members - whose role is to mediate between the working class and the capitalist class.

Bureaucratic and conservative tendencies operate on full-time union officials not simply because of the 'logic' of their distinctive collective bargaining 'function' (Roberts, 1976) or as a result of the pattern of social relations that permeates the practice of trade unionism (Hyman, 1979) but primarily because of their distinctive material and social position within capitalist society which places them in a different world from the bulk of their members. On the one hand, trade union leaders' role is to negotiate the terms on which workers are exploited. It follows

they fear the independent action and organisation of the rank and file because it threatens to undermine their control over the union apparatus and to disrupt the smooth bargaining relations which they often enjoy with employers. Because their own privileges are bound up with the strength and prosperity of the union machine, the official tends to see the organisation as an end in itself and their concern is always to contain workers' struggles, within the boundaries of 'normal' collective bargaining. The union official becomes what C. Wright Mills (1948, p9) termed "a manager of discontent". The commitment to parliament and 'Labourism' reinforces the pressures to distance themselves from strikes and other militant struggles. On the other hand, union leaders also have a vital interest in not pushing collaboration with employers and the state to a point where it makes them completely impotent. Therefore, they are sometimes compelled to launch struggles against employers and governments who place severe constraints on effective union activity and organisation. Moreover, it is important they deliver at least some improvements in pay and conditions for rank and file members otherwise it could result, eventually, in internal challenges from below. This explains why even right-wing union leaders see a role for strike action, if only as a threat to be used to extract concessions from the employers rather than a means of destroying the power of the employers.

The matter then is more complicated than a simple 'the officials always sell-out' analysis suggests. There have been periods when union officials opposed practically all workers' strikes, as from 1940 to the mid-1950s, but there have also been periods when they have actually led a good many official strikes, as from the late 1960s until the mid-1970s. Nor is it the case that the officials want to lose disputes. Invariably

they want a compromise deal more or less favourable to the workers concerned without risking a general confrontation with the employers. Nor are the officials always forced into action by an insurgent rank and file membership. On occasions, they can attempt to initiate action which some sections of the members may be less than enthusiastic about. As Kelly (1988) has pointed out union leaders are often politically and socially more progressive than many of their members. Moreover, there is considerable internal differentiation within the ranks of union officialdom, partly because officials in different industries with different conditions and traditions find themselves under different pressures from their members and partly because of the ideological differences between left and right-wing union leaders. Interesting splits and tensions can develop in the process. Nonetheless, whether full-time officials are 'left' or 'right' is less important than the fact that they acquire a set of interests different from those of the rank and file. It is the relative strength of the internal and external pressures bearing upon union officials from employers and the state on the one hand, and rank and file workers on the other, that explains why they tend to vacillate between leading struggles, limiting struggles and selling out. Crucially, whilst shopfloor workers ultimately have a common interest in overthrowing the capitalist system and establishing collective control over production, trade union officials - irrespective of any political differences within their ranks - have a common interest in confining workers' struggles within the framework of capitalist society rather than challenging the very social order from which trade unions derive their function.

It is precisely because shop steward organisations' arise directly from the daily struggles in the workplace and are more responsive to rank and file members' needs and interests that they are distinguished from official union structures, with which they are often in conflict. Even though shop steward organisations are themselves usually sectional and reformist - they tend to provide a significant counter-weight to the bureaucratic structures of 'official' trade unionism, representing what Allan Flanders (1970) termed the "challenge from below". Nonetheless, workplace trade unionism under capitalism is itself shot through with contradictions as will become apparent if we consider the dynamics of stewards' organisation through the three-fold conceptual framework of stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and full-time union officials.

*** shop stewards' relationship to management**

Firstly, the relationship between shop stewards and management involves a contradiction between tendencies towards conflict and accommodation. Thus, stewards display the general contradictory tendencies involved in trade unionism - that of seeking to organise resistance to capitalism but within the framework of the existing system (Lane, 1974; Hyman, 1975). On the one hand, shop stewards are a manifestation of the need for the collective defence of rank and file members' interests against the exploitation which profitable capitalist production requires. They are the living embodiment of the incompatibility of labour and capital. By co-ordinating workers' collective strength and at times directing this in

militant action, shop stewards can win significant improvements in their members' pay and conditions. Daily disputes over control of the work process - sometimes marked by very severe conflicts between stewards and managers - are of crucial importance in the development of strong workplace trade union organisation. Moreover, such shopfloor struggles, although often sectional and limited in objectives, contain the potential for a genuine challenge to capitalism.

On the other hand, the inherent threat posed to the security of shop steward organisation that does not agree to work by the 'rules of the game' encourages the development of a stable and compatible bargaining relationship, in which stewards channel rank and file workers' grievances into accommodatory procedures that operate within the boundaries of managerial authority and exploitative capitalist relations of production. Similarly, management's provision of a range of facilities to senior shop stewards - union office, 100 per cent time off work, etc - is intended to define co-operative relationships that promote stewards' partial incorporation into management structures, leading them to exercise a restraining role over members' militancy.

Turner, Clack and Roberts in their detailed study of the car industry in the mid-1960s stressed that in becoming established, stewards had developed:

a dependence on management itself. In a sense the leading stewards are performing a managerial function, of grievance settlement, welfare arrangement and human adjustment, and the steward system's acceptance by management (and thus in turn,

the facility with which the stewards themselves can satisfy their members demands and needs) has developed partly because of the increasing effectiveness - and certainly economy - with which this role is fulfilled (1967, p214).

The responses of shop stewards to such pressures towards 'responsibility' are often ambivalent. As Richard Hyman has explained:

They were often conscious of the threat involved in such employer strategies, and at times resisted fiercely. Yet they were also conscious of a common interest with employers in establishing an 'industrial legality', in creating order and regularity; partly because union security seemed dependent on some formal accomodation with the power of capital; partly because they had more faith in employer's goodwill than membership combativity as a source of improvements in employment conditions; partly because their own control was consolidated by the new machinery (1975, p158).

This is the central paradox of the shop stewards' relationship with management - expressing rank and file members' grievances but seeking to limit their manifestation to forms over which they can exert control and which do not jeopardise the overall bargaining arrangements developed with management. The key task of the shop steward is to mediate these conflicting pressures between conflict and accommodation.

*** shop stewards' relationship to rank and file members**

Secondly, the relationship between shop stewards and their rank and file members involves a contradiction between the tendencies towards democracy and bureaucracy. On the one hand, the institution of the shop stewards is profoundly democratic. Elected regularly and paid the average wage of those they represent they are the authentic expression of rank and file experience and aspirations. Tony Lane has contrasted them with parliamentary MP's:

The shop steward...did not once elected pack his bags and move off to carry out his representational duties in an institution alien to the experience of his constituents. Neither was his constituency so large that he could remain personally anonymous to the overwhelming majority of his electors...The steward spent the bulk of his time at work alongside those who had elected him...He was highly visible, subject to the same experiences at work as his comrades, and subject to the same group pressures (1974, p198).

The shop stewards' regular contact with management, other stewards and the wider official union, often gives them a breadth of knowledge and experience not readily available to rank and file members and invests them with some authority and respect on the shopfloor. But this does not mean stewards' recommendations are uncritically accepted. If stewards are to lead, they must be responsive to the changing needs and

expectations of members for failure to respond can lead to a challenge to their position. They may be forced to resign by an 'ad hoc' vote of constituents or replaced informally, if not by loss of office, by others who command wider support. Of course, this democratic accountability does not mean every steward is subject to the beck and call of every demand placed upon them. Nonetheless, the power of any shop steward is largely dependent upon the continuing support of their rank and file members and the ability to carry them in any course of action.

On the other hand, as with 'official' trade unionism, the pressures towards bureaucratisation clearly operate at the level of the workplace itself. The problems of organisation, of specialisation and of concentration of decision making, create a gap that can separate stewards from rank and file members. Particularly within larger workplaces, a distinct hierarchy can emerge with a number of senior shop stewards and Convenors tending to spend all or most of their time on union business (Hyman, 1979; Terry, 1983a). Sometimes, they can have more day-to-day contact with management than with the rank and file workers they represent. Provided with a union office and involved in joint management/union committees they can become divorced from the shopfloor and encouraged to think in terms of the interests of the company rather than their constituents. Moreover, because of their extensive networks of information, negotiating ability and influence with management, the senior stewards 'machine' of formal and informal sanctions can be utilised to discipline and bureaucratically stymie workers' militancy. As the Donovan Commission argued:

It is often wide of the mark to describe shop steward's as 'troublemakers'. Trouble is thrust upon them...Quite commonly they are supporters of order exercising a restraining influence on their members in conditions which promote disorder (1968, p28).

Thus, the predicament of the shop steward whose relationship to rank and file members is torn between the pressures towards democracy and bureaucracy.

*** shop stewards' relationship to union officials**

Thirdly, the relationship between shop stewards and full-time union officials involves a contradiction between the tendencies towards independence and dependence (Boraston, et al. 1975). On the one hand, there is the autonomous basis of shop steward organisation - stemming from rank and file workers' immediate collective pressure - which is able to carve out a degree of control over the work process and only rarely involve the outside official union machine. In large workplaces in particular, shop stewards usually have the resources at their disposal to acquire the experience necessary to handle a variety of grievances and negotiations internally, rather than calling for external assistance. Employers, on occasion and in certain circumstances, can seek to encourage steward autonomy for their own bargaining purposes. Crucially, steward organisations' can often act as an important counter-balance to the cautious preoccupations of official union leaders, putting pressure on them

in negotiations with employers, forcing them to call action and, if necessary, taking the initiative independently, even in defiance, of officials .

On the other hand, because stewards are the key link between the union as an organisation and the rank and file membership they inevitably derive a whole range of services from the external representatives of the official union apparatus. Steward committees' rely on the union machine for legal services, mutual assistance and general information. They quite often find it very important to try and get official union recognition for strike action, not only to provide dispute benefit but also to help win solidarity from other workers, in the form of respect for picket lines or boycotting of goods. Again, stewards may depend on union officials for top-level negotiations with company representatives or government ministers. Moreover, although influenced directly by lay shop steward representation the structure of the official union can also be very influential on autonomous shopfloor organisation. Thus, the contradiction between independence and dependence.

Although shop stewards are by no means immune from the accommodative and bureaucratic pressures diagnosed at the level of official trade unionism they remain qualitatively different from local and national full-time union officials in their potential responsiveness to rank and file pressure. Indeed, the steward has several advantages from the point of view of working class democracy because, despite their sometimes full-time status inside the workplace, there are major links cementing them to other stewards and shopfloor workers.

Firstly, shop stewards are usually paid the average wage of the workers they represent at a level determined by the strength of trade union organisation in the workplace, unlike union officials whose salary is paid by the union and is usually considerably greater than what rank and file members obtain. Secondly, shop stewards spend most of their working day alongside those they represent and are usually subject to annual election by their constituents. Because on the basis of their performance they can be removed by the members they provide an instrument that can be subordinated to the rank and file in a way that no (relatively remote) union official - operating on a geographical basis, often appointed rather than elected and usually holding office for five years or more - ever could be. Thirdly, the shop steward 'machine' is far more rudimentary than the formal organisation of official trade unionism, providing less of an institutional basis for sanctions against rank and file members. The dilemma of acting as a 'power over' as against a 'power for' the members is less radical for shop stewards than is the case at the official level of trade unionism (Hyman, 1975. p65). Fourthly, shop stewards are liable to be victimised in any management offensive and lose their jobs if redundancies are imposed or if the workplace is closed down, again setting them apart from full-time officials whose position is generally secure. Fifthly, the distinctive material interests of trade union officials - committed to the pursuit of class compromise with employers and the state - are fundamentally different from those of shop stewards. Although the function of the shop steward system is exposed to the same accommodative pressures it is to a much less significant degree. Officials are often prepared to compromise more than shop stewards who, because they are much closer to the

workers they represent, are under much greater direct pressure to force employers to improve pay and conditions. It follows that the dichotomy within trade unions between the rank and file (shop stewards and their members) and a trade union 'bureaucracy' (a stratum of full-time trade union officials) is a meaningful, albeit simplified, summary of a real contradiction.

As we have seen, there is a radical tension in the nature of shop steward organisation - between conflict and accommodation in stewards' relationship to management, between democracy and bureaucracy in stewards' relationship to rank and file members, and between independence and dependence in stewards' relationships to trade union officials. However, the different elements are not always of the same weight. This becomes clear if we bear in mind there is a fallacy in posing the shop stewards' position in terms of an 'either/or' logic. Each of the polar opposites must be understood not as a fixed proposition, but constantly in motion reflecting and at the same time changing the social conditions of which it is part. The result is a continuum of possible and overlapping shop steward responses, each dominant to a greater or lesser degree at particular points of time. In other words, each of the relationships are extremely dynamic.

Moreover, the three contradictory tendencies and counter-tendencies have to be understood as being relative and not absolute. If, for example, shop stewards' accommodation to management was absolutely missing, workers would seize control of production and take over the running of the factory. That this does not (normally) happen - and could never do so (on a sustained basis) within the confines of trade unionism -

indicates that each tendency has to be measured relative to its counter-tendency. Again, each of the three contradictory relationships cannot be viewed as entirely separate phenomena that occur irrespective of developments in the other. On the contrary, they are mutually interdependent, with each relationship directly influencing and being influenced by the other. Finally, it follows that the pressures operating in one specific workplace cannot be viewed isolated from those operating within other workplaces generally within society.

Thus, in different contexts, the balance struck between the contradictory tendencies and counter-tendencies within the shop stewards' position will vary considerably. Indeed, the history of shop steward organisation has been a history of the shifting balance between conflict and accommodation, democracy and bureaucracy, independence and dependence. In other words, the nature of shop steward and workplace trade union organisation is not a fixed, static phenomenon. As Antonio Gramsci wrote:

The trade union is not a predetermined phenomena. It becomes a determinate institution; it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it [1977, p265].

BALANCE OF FORCES

Arguably, it is the changing balance of forces in society between capital and labour - above all in the workplace where workers confront employers - that has a profound and usually determining effect on the nature of shop steward organisation and its relationship to management, rank and file members and full-time union officials. This balance depends upon the pressure on, and confidence of, the capitalist class to make workers' pay for falling profits' or slump, and the confidence and willingness of the working class to fight back. Every day in thousands of shopfloor disputes the wrestling for advantage goes on. Hence, time and motion and productivity deals, go-slows and overtime bans, strikes and lock-outs, pickets and anti-union laws and all the other tactics and strategems used by the contending classes in the industrial struggle. Of course, the relationship between the base of society and its superstructure, between economics and politics, is not one of mechanical determination or automatic reflection (Harman 1986). On the contrary, the interaction is complex and there is considerable scope for ideological and political factors to develop their own rhythm and to react back on the economic. Nonetheless, it is necessary to acknowledge the primacy of the material over the ideal, of the base over the superstructure, and of economics over politics. It follows that whilst the balance of class forces in society is affected by a variety of factors it is the battle in the workplace (with all its related economic, ideological and political components) which is of most significance.

In some respects, it is not straightforward to talk of the 'balance of class forces' because on the whole the correlation of forces is such as to give the capitalist class power over the working class. Whilst some sections of workers may be stronger in individual parts of the battlefield overall they are weaker than their opponents. If this were not the case the rule of the capitalist class would be long past. Nonetheless, workplace trade union organisation does provide workers with the collective strength to act as a powerful counteracting power to that of the employers which, although rarely equivalent, is capable of setting significant limits to managerial authority through a permanent process of pressure and mobilisation of sanctions. The most important factor pushing the balance of class forces in favour of the working class is their self-activity, organisation and independent initiative through collective struggle in the workplace.

Significantly, workers' consciousness is profoundly affected by their sense of confidence in what they can achieve in relation to the employers. On the one hand, workers who discover their ability to fight together and win against management can potentially develop all sorts of ideas based on their new found solidarity. Even small victories can give workers new confidence and new understanding. Of course, there are very substantial limitations and dilemmas for any translation of the radical potential of workplace trade unionism into a wider movement - not least the restraining influence of 'Labourism' - although when there is a real upsurge in struggle there can be a politicisation of quite wide layers of workers. The belief that trade union leaders and Labour politicians can substitute their own efforts for the struggle of the mass of workers can be

undermined and a minority of workers won to revolutionary socialist ideas. However, this is not an automatic process. It depends on the general objective situation in society and material constraints, how effective reformist leaders are in blocking action, the intervention of socialists in the workplace and so on. The periodic upsurges of revolutionary consciousness among millions of workers (Russia 1917, Germany 1919-23, Spain 1936, Portugal 1975) shows the potential in certain circumstances.

On the other hand, even workers with a traditionally strong sense of class solidarity can have their whole position undermined, for example by employers' defeats of key sections of the working class movement and/or by the impact of mass unemployment. Every defeat of workers can spread some degree of demoralisation, hopelessness and acquiescence to the status quo. If workers fail to use their collective power to fight successfully against management that lack of confidence will be reflected in their political ideas. In such periods the majority of workers can forget it was struggle that won their gains in the first place and the idea holds sway that everything derives from the efforts of union officials and Labour politicians. Ideas which tell them the rule of capital is inevitable and that 'uneconomic' factories must close will seem reasonable since it reflects their real life experience.

The key point being made here is that the nature of workplace trade unionism and shop steward organisation is deeply affected by the balance of class forces in society and in particular the fighting strength and consciousness of the working class in the workplace. A variety of economic, social and political factors directly affect the balance of class forces including the state of the economy, employers' strategies,

government policies, the character and size of the class struggle, the level of workers' organisation and consciousness, the nature of the political leadership inside the working class, and a variety of other social and political developments in society. Of course, the state of shop steward organisation - its strength, cohesiveness and independent initiative - is itself also an index of the balance of class forces, which will have a major influence on the pendulum of advantage between capital and labour. Nonetheless, the balance of class forces cannot be reduced to shop steward organisation. It describes something much broader than this complex sphere of steward organisation which affects its nature, its strengths and weaknesses. As one element in a equation, the state of shop steward organisation is both a cause and effect of the balance of class forces.

However, it is clear there are significant variations in bargaining leverage and in the terrain of management-shop steward relations in different workplaces, industries and localities. The 'balance of bargaining power' can be used to describe the specific pendulum of advantage between management and workers in any particular workplace, something which is affected by such 'micro-level' factors as the state of product and labour markets, management strategy and the structure of collective bargaining arrangements, the nature of the production system and the relationship of workers to it, workers' collective cohesion, the role of full-time union officials, the nature of trade union organisation and shop steward leadership and the influence of political activists. Obviously there is a continuous and overlapping interrelationship between the balance of bargaining power in the workplace and the balance of class forces in

society. Thus, the state of the British economy can have a direct bearing on product and labour markets in a particular geographical area, which in turn affects individual plant managements' strategy towards shop steward organisation and workers' willingness to fight. In other words, in evaluating the nature of shop steward organisation in any single workplace it is necessary to give detailed consideration to the peculiar 'micro-level' factors which affect the balance of bargaining power and to locate these within its much broader 'macro-level' social, economic and political context of the changing balance of class forces in Britain. The full relevance of my analytical framework - namely, stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and officials - will become apparent by considering the general background hypothesis guiding my research.

BACKGROUND HYPOTHESIS

It is possible to identify two broad phases of the class struggle between capital and labour in Britain over the last 20 years, namely the upturn in workers' struggles during the early 1970s in which the balance of class forces swung in favour of the working class and the period of downturn which set in from the mid-1970s and continued throughout the 1980s in which the pendulum swung back in favour of the ruling class (Cliff, 1979). Certainly, the struggles under the Heath Conservative government were qualitatively different from those that occurred under the Thatcher administrations. The Labour government's 'Social Contract' that

came between these two periods - with its spirit of class collaboration between government, employers and trade unions - was crucial in making the switch (Coates, 1989). Although the downturn preceded the 1979-82 recession the very rapid rise in unemployment during that period exacerbated the situation.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s the high level of class struggle and victory of some workers inspired others to take action. Strike followed strike. Strong, independent and self-reliant shop steward organisation emerged that was relatively combative in its relationship to employers and the government. The confidence of shopfloor members provided the steam for the engine of shop steward strength, ensuring a relatively close and democratic relationship between leaders and led, as stewards articulated members' grievances and proved highly responsive to the demands of the rank and file. Moreover, stewards were able to act relatively independently of full-time union officials, sometimes in defiance of their wishes. The higher the level of organisation and confidence of the rank and file in fighting the employers the more able they were to break the shackles of union officials. Finally, sectionalism - both within sections of workers and between sections of workers - became less central at least amongst a minority of stewards, who began to go beyond the boundaries of the workplace and engage in generalised activity of considerable political content.

By contrast, during the 1980s, the level of struggle was very low. The confidence of shop stewards to mount an effective fightback against the employers and government was very much on the defensive, a process reinforced with every major defeat for workers in struggle.

Equally, sectionalism tended to predominate with little or no political generalisation among those in struggle or between those fighting and those not. The result was an atrophy of shop steward organisation, which in turn, had an enormous impact on workers' consciousness. Many workers tended to accept ideas pumped into their heads by management, such as company 'viability' and 'profitablity', as being the only practical ones. Thus, the dominance of the ideas of 'new realism' within the trade union movement. The outcome of all this was firstly, shop stewards became generally much less confident and combative in their relationship with management; instead the balance tilted towards a more accommodative relationship.

Secondly, there was an undermining of the close accountability of shop stewards to their rank and file members, as the tendencies towards bureaucratisation intensified and stewards became more inclined to restrain than lead shopfloor militancy. Thirdly, stewards generally lacked the confidence and ability to take action irrespective of the influence of full-time union officials, with the pendulum swinging towards a relative dependence on them. As a result, the officials became even more of an impediment to victory in workers' struggles.

Nonetheless, there were also important countervailing pressures and informal workplace sanctions to those acting solely to incorporate, bureaucratised and weaken shop steward organisation. The process of change was uneven and important continuities simultaneously co-existed. Certainly, the basic structure of shop steward organisation has survived the economic and legal assault of recent years and is still largely intact. Even if the balance of power has firmly shifted towards the employers they still feel constraints on their 'right to manage' and shop

stewards are still able to resist, amend or undermine managerial initiatives on some occasions and win major concessions and gains on others (Spencer, 1989; Heaton and Linn 1989). An immense variety of circumstances advance and constrain workers' activity and class consciousness within capitalism, but always the seedbed of class conflict is being re-sown and re-fertilised by everyday experience of exploitation. The accommodation of labour is anything but a simple and automatic process and the potential for challenge is endlessly renewed. Certainly, there is no justification for assuming that the present weaknesses of shop steward organisation will be either permanent or irreversible. Not only could the balance of class forces be reversed at some stage in the future but the balance struck between the general contradictory tendencies within shop stewards' relationships to management, to rank and file members and to union officials could also be radically altered.

Therefore, to repeat the central tenet of the background hypothesis guiding this research: the nature of shop steward organisation is not a fixed or static phenomenon, but largely depends on the ebbs and flows of the class struggle reflected in the balance of class forces. The relative strength of the internal and external forces bearing upon shop stewards shifts and fluctuates. The in-built contradictory nature of workplace trade unionism gives the process a constantly uneven, dynamic character. My research attempts to document the specific factors contributing to the changing nature of shop steward organisation within three workplaces in Liverpool over the last 20 years, whilst locating these accounts within a broader analysis of the 'political economy' and balance of class forces in which they are embedded.

The hypothesis is important, not so much in itself but, in so far as it helps focus critical attention on the underlying features of shop steward organisation and, in particular, provides a mechanism by which to examine Batstone's reformist model of 'moderate' workplace trade union unionism, the dialectical relationship between shopfloor organisation, activity and consciousness, and the distinctive potential role of alternative revolutionary socialist political leadership within the workplace.

THE RESEARCH

Finally, it remains to consider the research strategy, technique and methodology - flowing from the analytical framework and background hypothesis outlined above - that will underpin my empirical study into the dynamics of shop steward organisation. A case study approach has been adopted because I believe a more detailed observation of particular companies and workplaces is necessary to complement existing large scale surveys. Surveys provide a wealth of data on shop steward organisation and are particularly useful for providing material on patterns of institutional arrangements but they usually confine themselves to reporting certain easily observable features of industrial relations and present them by means of averages and distributions. The complex elements which are such an important component of shopfloor behaviour and organisation often go unrecorded or unremarked in any detail. The great

strength of a case study approach is that it has allowed me to concentrate on specific workplaces and to explore, identify and understand the various interactive social processes at work, and not least the underlying substantive outcome as well as the procedural forms. In addition, a case study approach has enabled a longitudinal account, capturing not merely a snap-shot of developments but the reel of film, documenting the changes and continuities within an historical context, revealing how present shop steward organisation is a product of past activity and relationships that contains the potential for further change and development.

For the last 20 years the focus of much industrial relations research has been concentrated on manual workers in private manufacturing industry and my case studies continue within this tradition. Despite the recent 'post-industrial' claims of 'post-Fordism' Britain still remains a major industrial economy with total industrial capacity still amounting to the sixth largest chunk of global production within the boundaries of any nation state. Notwithstanding the decline of manufacturing employment relative to the rest of the British workforce its social weight is still completely out of proportion to and far outweighs its numerical size (in terms of its importance to the state of the economy as a whole and in overall levels of industrial action) and its workers still wield enormous potential muscle due to their strategic position at the point of production. Traditionally, shop steward organisation in manufacturing industry has exercised a major influence on workplace trade unionism in the newer, less well organised sections of the British working class movement, among white collar and service sector workers. There is no reason, short of radical de-industrialisation, to believe this will no

longer continue to be the case in the future. Moreover, empirical research on shop steward organisation within manufacturing industry constitutes an important benchmark by which to assess the significance of the major changes in organisational strength that British workplace trade unionism has experienced in recent years.

Significantly, the Merseyside area highlights in graphic relief the economic, social and political changes that have been wrought on the shopfloor of British industry. During the 1970s and 80s there was a dramatic reduction in the numbers employed within manufacturing industry in the region as numerous plants were hit by redundancies and closures, resulting in very high levels of unemployment. Between 1979-85 a total of 449 factories closed with the loss of some 40,000 manufacturing jobs, one third of the Merseyside's total (Liverpool City Council, 1984). Compared with other regions large scale industrial capital arrived late in Merseyside, but during the 1950s and 60s swiftly asserted its hold over areas of Liverpool and new estates such as Kirkby, Speke and Halewood. With a regional economy characterised by major concentrations of semi and unskilled manual workers employed in the plants of national and multi-national corporations, post-war Merseyside became a model breeding ground for the 'collective worker'. Ironically, Ford's located its plant in Merseyside partly because of the region's presumed immunity from the industrial militancy of Dagenham and the West Midlands car industry. Clearly, history was to confound the expectations of the corporate investment planners. The impact of a distinctive combination of structural forces and the underlying influence of the region's historical vulnerability to cyclical fluctuations in the national and world economy interacted with

the legacies of union organisation in the docks and a number of manufacturing plants closed during the 1970s to create a relatively cohesive class based identity and consciousness (Lane, 1987). Hence Merseyside's reputation in trade union circles as a formidably well organised place with a notoriously strike-prone workforce (Bean and Stoney, 1986). Therefore, on both issues, the decimation of its manufacturing industry and the alleged militancy of its workers, Merseyside provides an intriguing place to conduct research and to contribute to the existing rich source of analysis of workplace trade unionism in the region carried out by Beynon (1984), Thompson and Bannon (1985), and Spencer (1989).

Case studies have been conducted into shop steward organisation within three different Merseyside manufacturing plants, the Ford car plant in Halewood, the Birds Eye food processing plant in Kirkby and the Bemrose printing plant in Aintree; all three plants owned by foreign multi-national companies (namely Ford, Unilever and News International); with established shop steward organisations and formal bargaining relationships with management stretching back over 20 years; experiencing during the 1980s massive work reorganisation and large scale redundancies, and in the case of Birds Eye and Bemrose, plant closure. Ford's, an extremely large plant (employing 8,000 workers) was chosen for its self-evident importance; the other two much smaller plants (employing between 600-900 workers) were more representative of fairly average, medium sized workplaces. The three companies reflect a range of manufacturing sectors with varied product markets and contrasting trade unions organised on site; two factories share a predominately male workforce composition, the other mainly female. Thus, taken together the case studies provide

extremely fertile ground for comparative assessment.

Most of my data was gathered from extensive interviews with a cross-section of representatives from different sections of the three plants, particularly a number of shop stewards, rank and file union members and plant managers, but including full-time officials; most had some ten years' experience and active involvement in plant-based affairs and were able to draw upon their wealth of knowledge to place specific issues and general events within their historical context. My reason for choosing to interview 'activists' was not merely because such people had relevant personal experience to base their interpretations upon but also because they were more inclined to be able to understand and articulate that experience in the light of their practical involvement than would an arbitrarily selected group of shopfloor workers. However, I also interviewed a number of rank and file union members who were not active in formal terms in the stewards' committee or union branch but who nevertheless had very useful insights to shed upon workplace relations. Such data was supplemented by detailed analysis of company documents, shop steward and union branch minute books and newspaper accounts.

Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they allowed the multiplicity of standpoints of the various interest groups to be recreated, allowing for a realistic reconstruction of a three-dimensional picture of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness in each workplace. They also facilitated an emphasis on the subjective aspects of shopfloor behaviour that complement more structural accounts. Unfortunately, there exists a long line of research which views workers as the objects of history and attributes a

passive role to rank and file trade unionists. Prima-facie this may be considered mistaken, given the active initiative, often involving bitter struggle, of the workers who establish a degree of control on the shopfloor and encroach on managerial prerogative in the first place. Interviews help place the emphasis on shop stewards and rank and file members as the subjects of history who, are not merely objective products of society but who, subjectively react back to change it.

Methodologically, I have adopted an explicit view of the mutually interdependent relationship between myself as a researcher and the social phenomena I have investigated, interpreting 'the facts' obtained through a unique personal perspective in which subjective and objective factors are in constant interplay. As C. Wright. Mills (1966) remarked: "I have tried to be objective, I do not claim to be detached". Naturally, the reader is not obliged to share the political assumptions underpinning my case study research, although they do have the right to demand my study should not simply be the defence of a political position, but rather an internally well founded portrayal of the actual underlying social processes of shop steward organisation.

Leon Trotsky answered objections of a lack of 'impartiality' in his writings on the Russian Revolution which is pertinent to my own research:

The serious and critical reader will not want a treacherous impartiality, which offers him a cup of conciliation with a well-settled poison of reactionary hate at the bottom, but a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and

antipathies - open and disguised - seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the casual laws of their movement. That is the only possible historic objectivity, and moreover, it is amply sufficient, for it is verified and tested not by the good intentions of the historian, for which only he himself can vouch, but by the natural laws revealed by him of the historic process itself [1977, p21].

Obviously, in some respects the analysis of specific case studies of shop steward organisation within three Merseyside plants provides only a limited basis from which to make wider generalisations, not least because of sectoral, regional and corporate variations. Certainly, the specific workplaces at the heart of this study can hardly be regarded as a representative sample or even 'typical' of the area in which they are located. Yet in other respects, the very idea of a typical factory is an artificial construction of those commentators who conceive of only one mode of generalisation - the extrapolation from sample to population. There is however, as Michael Buroway has explained, a second mode of generalisation:

...which seeks to illuminate the forces at work in society as a totality rather than to reflect simply on the constancy and variation of isolated factory regimes within a society...this second mode...is the extension from the micro context to the totality which shapes it. According to this view every

particularity contains a generality; each particular factory regime is the product of general forces operating at a societal or global level (1985, p18).

Therefore, whilst accepting the limitations of making any statistical generalisation to a larger population of cases it is possible to make some analytical generalisations. In this sense, the importance of the case studies lies less in their 'typicality' than for their theoretical relevance and for the broad insights which they can provide in highlighting the underlying patterns of shop steward organisation and behaviour, particularly in manufacturing industry.

STRUCTURE OF THESIS

The analytical framework outlined above - with its emphasis on shop stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and full-time union officials - has not only structured the interpretation of my fieldwork data, it has also shaped the mode of its written presentation for each of the three workplaces. Although it is only by observing the interconnections between these relationships that a fully rounded understanding can be obtained of the dynamics of shop steward organisation, it is useful to separate them conceptually for reasons of formal presentation which make it accessible for the reader. It is also useful to separate the decade of the 1970s from that of the 1980s because in

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general terms there is a marked contrast between the two periods with respect to the contradictory tendencies at work.

CHAPTER TWO: BIRDS EYE

INTERVIEWEES :

Jimmy Bennett: TGWU rank and file union member in 2-shift area of Unit 2 department

Billy Caldwell: TGWU rank and file union member in 3-shift area of Unit 2 department (and shop steward for two years).

Joe Carberry: TGWU shop steward in 3-shift area of Unit 2 department.

Brenda Carberry: TGWU rank and file union member in 2-shift area of Unit 2 department.

Paul Chin: TGWU Branch Secretary and shop steward in butchery department.

Mary Scoggins: TGWU rank and file union member in beefburger/steaklit department.

Bryan Lockett: TGWU deputy Convenor and shop steward in 2-shift area of Unit 2 department.

John Morgan: TGWU shop steward in 3-shift area of Unit 2 department.

Eddie Roberts: TGWU local full-time union official.

Dave Worrall: AUEW rank and file union member in engineering department.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS :

1968: Convenor granted full-time status.

1969: One-day factory strike against withholding of pay.

1970:

1971: Three-day factory strike over lay-off pay.

TGWU branch policy on lay-offs adopted.

Negotiating committee formed.

1972: One-day factory strike over lay-offs.

1973: Cold store inquiry.

One-day factory strike over May Day holiday.

1974: One-hour factory strike against canteen price increases and national pay offer.

1975: Resignation of Bobbie Lamb and negotiating committee.

1976: Birds Eye Five Year Plan.

1977: Bobbie Lamb re-elected Convenor.

Two-day factory strike over payment for racque line.

Four-week factory strike over automation bonus payment.

Management lock-out of workforce begins.

1978: Lock-out ends.

Factory overtime ban over short-term contracts.

1979: Two-day factory strike over suspension of two workers.

Joe Barton elected as Convenor.

Two-week factory strike over demarcation in 3-shift area.

1980: One-day factory strike in support of TUC Day of Action over anti-union legislation.

1981:

1982: One-day factory strike across all Birds Eye plants over pay.

One-day factory strike in support of TUC Day of Action for NHS workers.

1983:

1984: One-day factory strike in support of Liverpool City Council.

One-day factory strike across all Birds Eye plants over redundancies in Great Yarmouth.

1985: Workstyle introduced in East Anglia.

Two-day factory strike in support of Gloucester Birds Eye plant dispute.

Closure of butchery department.

1986: Closure of chicken stripping department.

1987: Negotiating committee requests introduction of Workstyle.

1988: Deadlocked negotiations over Workstyle.

1989: Closure of factory.

SHOP STEWARDS' LEADERSHIP 1970s AND 1980s.

| Year | Convenor | Deputy Convenor |
|------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Jan. 1971- | | |
| Dec. 1975 | Bobbie Lamb | Joe Barton |
| Jan. 1976- | | |
| Dec. 1976 | George Knight | Kenny Hayes/Paul Chin |
| Jan. 1977- | | |
| Aug. 1979 | Bobbie Lamb | Joe Barton |
| Aug. 1979- | | |
| Dec. 1980 | Joe Barton | Joe Carberry |
| Jan. 1981- | | |
| Dec. 1985 | Joe Barton | Frank Doyle |
| Jan 1986- | | |
| Sept. 1989 | Joe Barton | Bryan Lockett |

LOCAL FULL-TIME UNION OFFICIALS 1970/80s:

Early 1970s: Jim Traynor

1974-1987: Eddie Roberts

1987-1989: John Farrell

CHAPTER TWO: BIRDS EYE

INTRODUCTION

The Birds Eye frozen food plant was a wartime munitions works until the company took it over and re-developed the site in 1953, encouraged by regional grants and the promise of an accessible workforce. In the 1960s Birds Eye became a subsidiary of Unilever, the gigantic Anglo-Dutch multinational - whose consumer products stretch from Persil washing powder to Blue Band margarine and Liptons tea - employing 353,000 workers worldwide, of whom around 32,000 work in Britain. The Merseyside plant was only one of a number of Birds Eye plants scattered across the country, including Gloucester, Grimsby and Lowestoft. In 1988 Unilever's frozen food division made an operating profit of £153 million. In 1989, in the same month it announced the closure of its Merseyside Birds Eye plant, allegedly because of the refusal of its 1,000 workers to accept new working practices, Unilever reported record profits of £1,516 million (1). The plant was situated in Kirkby, developed after the second world war as an overspill town from Liverpool, in the borough of Knowsley. In 1988 a survey of living standards in 459 local authority districts by Liverpool University's Centre of Urban Studies placed Knowsley at the bottom as the most deprived area in Britain (2). When the Birds Eye factory closed Kirkby's unemployment rate was three times the national average, more than

62 per cent of the population were eligible for family credit and 40,000 residents received housing benefit (3).

The product range varied considerably over the 36 years the plant was operational but the factory's heyday was in the early 1970s when it primarily made the Captain Bird's Eye frozen fish range of products and beefburgers, steak-lits, pies and pastries. The 1980s change in people's eating habits towards more varied and health-conscious tastes saw their replacement by equally successful frozen TV dinner convenience food, namely the highly popular MenuMasters ready meal range (including spaghetitis, curries, vegetable meals and cauliflower cheeses). Changes in product range saw a corresponding transformation in the nature of work in the plant. During the early 1970s the machinery was very antiquated, work was intensive and extremely repetitive and there was a quite marked sexual division of labour. Most women workers were concentrated on the assembly lines and most men did heavy manual work, supplying ingredients to the women on the lines and operating the machinery. This division was even more marked in certain departments within the factory which employed virtually exclusively either men or women. After an 18-week management lock-out of the workforce in 1978, there was a massive influx of capital investment and 'state of the art' new technology into the plant. Where it had previously been very labour-intensive it now changed into a more capital-intensive operation. Completely new types of assembly lines and high-speed packaging machinery resulted in an overall contraction of labour although the basic division of labour between male and female workers remained.

Situated on a sprawling estate and housed in two main buildings the factory had a number of different departments during the

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1970s, all with their own managers and financial budgets. There was the cooked foods department - known as the pie room (which employed about 200 mainly female workers); the chicken-stripping department (which employed about 130 mainly female workers); the butchery department (which employed about 80 male workers); the steak-lits/beefburger department (which employed about 160 male and female workers, although predominantly women); the cold-store department (which employed about 60 male workers); the freeze and case department (which employed about 30 male and female workers); the fish department - known as the cod-in-sauce (which employed about 30 mainly female workers); and the boiler house (which employed about 20 male workers). In addition, a number of craftsmen - including an 80-strong engineering department - worked on the site. After 1978 the factory underwent a major re-organisation of work following large scale redundancies, the introduction of new technology and the closure of a number of departments. The most important new development was the complete renovation of an adjacent building complex on the site, known as Unit 2, where new automated assembly lines were installed to produce the brand new MemuMaster range of products and where the old pie room operations were transferred. The largest department within Unit 2 (cooked and prepared foods) employed about 600 predominantly women workers. In addition, there was a completely new chicken-stripping department (employing about 130 mainly female workers); the old butchery department (employing about 80 male workers); the old cold-store (employing only about 30 male workers); and a much reduced freeze and case department (employing about 15 male and female workers). There was also a small engineering department. By 1987, after further closures, the only major department in the plant left

functioning was Unit 2 where all the production lines were situated.

The growing popularity of Birds Eye's frozen food products led to a sustained increase in employment during the 1960s and at its peak in the early 1970s the factory employed a total of about 1,650 production workers (plus electricians, engineers, supervisors and white collar staff). But throughout most of the 1970s there were about 1,400 production workers (members of the Transport and General Workers Union) until redundancies in 1978 reduced the workforce to about 1,000 for most of the 1980s. Across the factory there were more male than female employees. Yet among the three-quarters of the workforce represented by the TGWU there was always a majority of women workers, although proportionally it differed quite considerably from department to department. For most women workers throughout the 1970s it was a single day-shift operation (8am-4.30pm) although there was also quite a substantial number of women on a twilight shift (5.30pm-10pm) working on the main production lines either in the cooked foods or the beefburgers/steak-lits departments. The vast majority of men worked a double day shift (6am-2pm and 2pm-10pm, alternating weekly) apart from a handful who were on single day-shift or permanent night work. Thus, in the beefburger/steak-lit department there was a mixed, although predominantly female workforce, operating and servicing the assembly lines, with 20 men each on a double day-shift, 60 women on a single day-shift, 60 women on a twilight-shift and a number of male single day-shift and permanent night-shift workers.

By contrast, in the cooked foods department - known as the pie room - it was an overwhelmingly female workforce, with 100 plus women on a single day-shift and 100 plus women on a twilight shift, with

only a handful of men working in the department. Elsewhere in the factory, it was either virtually all women, as in the chicken-stripping department, or all men, as in the butchery and cold store departments. After 1978, and until the factory's closure, the vast majority of women (except those in the new chicken stripping department) went onto a double day-shift operation as the old twilight shift was disbanded. Meanwhile, a new three-shift operation for male workers in the preparation side of the cooked foods department of Unit 2 was opened (which at its height employed about 84 men). Thus, in Unit 2, the major department in the factory during the 1980s, there were concentrated over 600 workers, about 400 women and 200 men, mainly on a double day-shift, plus an 80-strong three-shift of male workers. By contrast, the other two major departments in the factory were either virtually exclusively female, as in the new chicken-stripping department, or exclusively male, as in the old butchery and cold store departments.

There was no trade union structure in the factory when Birds Eye opened the plant in the early 1950s. It was only formally recognised after repeated skirmishes between shopfloor workers and management led to a closed shop agreement in 1960 with the Transport and General Workers Union. Nonetheless, management refused to grant the shop stewards any facilities and there were constant conflicts over time off work to attend to members' grievances. Plant-wide negotiations were conducted through the channel of the lay shop stewards' Convenor. Yet in the late 1960s a number of changes occurred in line with the Donovan Commission's recommendations for the reform of workplace industrial relations. The plant Convenor was granted full-time status and provided

with a union office and telephone and shop stewards were allowed greater leeway in the facility time available to them. Later, in 1971, a plant-wide negotiating committee was set up - composed of the Convenor, deputy Convenor and three other senior stewards - to bargain over major conditions of work. In 1970, a national agreement between Birds Eye and the TGWU established a Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) through which annual wage negotiations were conducted by top-level corporate managers and full-time union officials, although in 1973 the Convenors from each of the four Birds Eye plants were allowed to attend JNC meetings, and in 1984 the deputy Convenor also became part of the negotiating forum. At local level, stewards were still able to negotiate over job evaluation, bonus schemes and condition rates - until measured day work was introduced in 1978.

The shop stewards' committee throughout the 1970s and 1980s numbered between 27-30 members and was always a male-dominated body. Stewards were elected every two years by secret ballot in each department of the factory, usually on a shift basis although the larger the department the greater the number of stewards. It met monthly during working hours. The five senior stewards on the factory's negotiating committee were elected by members of the shop stewards' committee every two years. They met with management on a sporadic basis although most day-to-day negotiations were conducted directly by the Convenor, the only steward with full-time facility status. The Birds Eye TGWU 6/505 union branch was organised on a factory basis and played an important role in the shopfloor organisation within the plant. Branch meetings were held every month to which the Convenor delivered a report on developments within the plant. The branch committee - composed of a mixture of 15-20 shop stewards and rank

and file union activists - also met every month, usually in working hours, and was elected annually at a branch meeting.

Most of my research material was obtained through extensive interviews with a number of key informants in the Kirkby plant. Unfortunately, despite repeated formal approaches, the top-level decision by Unilever to shut the plant gave local Birds Eye management in Kirkby justification for refusing pointblank to grant me 'access' or to offer assistance of any kind whatsoever for my research. Instead, I was forced to rely upon informal approaches to sympathetic 'insiders' on the trade union side able to facilitate the process of 'getting in'. It was the subsequent three-month campaign launched by the shop stewards' committee against the factory's closure that enabled me to establish a close relationship with a number of leading stewards and workplace union activists. I was generously provided with information which was not only of tremendous assistance in reconstructing an account from one set of combatants but also helped me to fill in some of the gaps that their antagonists had left me. I was allowed to observe a number of mass meetings of the union membership during the campaign against closure, invited to weekly meetings of the Birds Eye Support Group from which stewards and union members built up community resistance to the shutdown, and provided with invaluable chronological and documentary material in the form of meticulously kept minute books of the shop steward's committee, TGWU branch and branch committee, stretching from the period of 1960 right up until 1989. It was from such close collaboration that I was able to carry out in-depth interviews with a number of key shopfloor trade union informants.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1970s

*** the early 1970s; the stewards' strengths and weaknesses**

During the early 1970s the balance of bargaining power in the Birds Eye Kirkby plant was undoubtedly weighted to the relative advantage of the shop stewards. Indeed, in 1972-3 the relationship between the stewards and Kirkby management was considered so strained that Birds Eye repeatedly threatened to close the plant down; the chairman of the company personally visited Merseyside on three occasions to lay 'down the law' to the workforce. A key factor enhancing stewards' bargaining leverage appears to have been the rapid expansion of the market for frozen TV dinner convenience foods which led to a dramatic increase in factory output and a steady influx of new labour. Management's relatively confrontationalist stance was also important. In general terms, management strategy oscillated between vigorous confrontation over particular issues and congenial acceptance of shopfloor arrangements based on custom and practice. In part, this reflected a disparity between the attitude adopted by plant managers as opposed to those at departmental level. At plant level, day-to-day relations with shop stewards were relatively much more conflictual although this was often encouraged by corporate Birds Eye management intervention. For example, changes in Birds Eye's product range sometimes led to lay-offs of sections of workers and inevitable outright confrontation with shop stewards over the guaranteed working week. Day-to-day relations with

departmental managers were usually more co-operative although this varied from one section to another.

The election of Bobbie Lamb as the new shop stewards' Convenor at the beginning of 1971 was another important factor helping to build the strength of union organisation in the plant. In 1968 Birds Eye had created a central, authoritative figure in the Kirkby plant in the shape of a full-time shop stewards' Convenor. No doubt it was hoped that by granting full-time status and facilities (including a union office and telephone) the new Convenor's authority over what was becoming an increasingly more assertive workforce would be reinforced. Yet, Bobbie Lamb played a quite different role to those previously in office.

Joe Carberry was a 25 year old militant trade unionist and independent socialist when he started working at Birds Eye in 1973. Elected to a shop steward's position in the cooked foods department (which he retained for 13 years) he served for a period of time on the factory negotiating committee and was a consistent activist in the TGWU branch. He outlined the influential, combative and also political, role, Bobbie Lamb played in the factory:

He was a very influential figure in as much as Birds Eye hated him. He worked in the plant for 20 years and was a very charismatic person, articulate, an orator. He could hold an audience Bobbie, speak on any subject until the cows came home. He was a fairly militant Convenor, all right. There were a lot of disputes in the early '70s and Bobbie Lamb would always get involved. And in my experience of things, 9 times out of 10 he

would win...he was very much politically minded - he was a real socialist - and he allied his politics to his job. It was through Bobbie Lamb's influence that we got the type of policies we did.

Such a socialist outlook and overtly combative approach towards management does not appear to have been matched by most of the other shop stewards in the factory during the early 1970s. Nonetheless, the day-to-day battle with management on the shopfloor was another important factor helping to forge the strength of the Birds Eye stewards' organisation. Basic wages were negotiated at national level by full-time officials and the Convenors from the four TGWU Birds Eye plants. Invariably, when the company made its offer the stewards' committee would recommend rejection - sometimes imposing an overtime ban - only to find themselves left isolated by the unwillingness of the other less well organised plants to take any action, although the stewards did organise a one-hour factory wide stoppage of work in 1974 to bolster the bargaining leverage of union officials involved in wage negotiations and to protest at local canteen price increases. Moreover, there was a significant element of local pay determination inside the Kirkby plant. Joe Carberry remembered:

One of the things you used to measure the stewards by was how well they performed in writing up job descriptions and getting the claim submitted through a job evaluation panel. It was a fairly easy system to understand and even easier to make sure you got an award out of it. If you look at national pay awards

we didn't do very well but we did fairly well in local negotiations within the factory. Basic pay was about £35 at the time - the top rate on job evaluation was £4.35p.

Job evaluation was not the only way stewards could get money into the wage packets of their members. Paul Chin - who worked at Birds Eye for 26 years (mainly in the butchery department), was the TGWU branch secretary for 15 years, intermittently holding a steward's card, and a left-of-centre member of the Labour Party - explained the importance of bonus schemes:

They were set up on a weekly basis - in some departments on an individual basis and in others on a group basis. In theory, they were subject to review every twelve months but in practice most of them would be altered whenever there was a dispute. Often it would be geared to a machine. But if the machinery broke down and people lost their bonus there'd be a dispute and the shop stewards would re-negotiate it. There were little innovations all the time. But the bonus was worth up to about £1.30p so it was a fair chunk of money.

In addition, there were condition rates, negotiated by stewards in particularly hazardous departments of the factory - such as the cold store - which were worth up to £2.50p.

Perhaps the key cutting edge helping to sharpen the stewards' strength was the high level of disputes in the factory provoked

by management's confrontationist approach. Thus, in March 1971, the company imposed lay-offs on hundreds of workers for four weeks (4). As a result, one of the first policies adopted by the shop stewards' committee under Bobbie Lamb's leadership, was the 'one-out, all-out' policy aimed at forcing the company to concede lay-off pay or a guaranteed working week, although it took two major plant-wide all-out strikes - lasting 3 days in 1971 and 1 day in 1972 - before management finally conceded a lay-off agreement (5). The stewards' willingness to adopt a relatively militant approach to crack management's inflexibility was further successfully demonstrated with another one-day factory wide stoppage in 1973, this time over the company's refusal to grant workers a May Day holiday (6). There were also quite a few sectional disputes, even if there was a significant variation in stewards' bargaining leverage between different departments in the factory. By far the best organised section was the cold-store department, the final assembly area of the factory where the finished manufactured products were stacked onto pallets ready for transportation. The cold-store workers' strategic position meant they wielded tremendous shopfloor power. Joe Carberry recalled:

It was a well organised part of the factory - no two ways about it. There was a walk-out practically every week. They were forever getting into trouble. A lot of it transpired from the fact that they had this large meandering workforce within the cold-store that knew its strength in the factory as far as its industrial power was concerned. Their key tool was the high reach forklift truck. No one else in the factory was trained to

drive them, so if there was a stoppage in the cold store nothing could be done, the factory would virtually come to a standstill there and then. They held a monopoly of power in that sense. A lot of the disputes were just parochial issues that just concerned the cold-store itself. But the stewards were very capable stewards. They used to gain bonus payments double what the rest of the factory got. It was the most militant part of the factory. Actually, they used to say that if one of the stewards broke wind in the cold-store - they'd all walk-out.

The next best organised section of the factory was the butchery department, where the 80-strong male workforce cut the massive carcasses of meat. Because management relied upon a continuous flow of production - with little space to store the raw material meat - the butchers' stewards were often able to press home their advantage and were always assured of a top bonus. For example, in November 1974 they took industrial action to successfully win improved condition rates (7). By comparison, in the other areas of the factory where the assembly lines were situated - such as the cooked foods and beefburger/steaklit departments - shopfloor workers did not have the same kind of strategic relationship to production; the work regime was much more controlled, discipline much stricter and flexibility of labour greater. As a result, the steward organisation was relatively much weaker. Nonetheless, there were still quite a high level of disputes, usually because the breakdown of antiquated machinery often curtailed workers' weekly bonus payments.

There is no doubt another key factor spurring on the militancy of rank and file members was the high level of struggle inside the British working class movement generally. As Joe Carberry recalled:

The union organisation was at its height in the early '70s, no two ways about that. A lot of the time we had the company on the run. 'Cause what you've got to remember about the early '70s is that there was this huge wave of euphoria the unions were carried away on at the time. You know, the industrial relations legislation was in force at the time and there was a massive upswell against that. There was a general air of confidence on the shopfloor in terms of what people thought they could win. It was a situation where you felt that if you did go into dispute you were going to win.

In December 1971, when 600 workers occupied the Thorn Fisher Bendix plant in Kirkby and launched a highly successful campaign for the 'right to work' throughout Merseyside, Birds Eye workers were centrally involved in solidarity work (8). Running parallel with this campaign in 1972-3 was the battle spearheaded in Kirkby against the Conservative government's Housing Finance Act, with thousands of Tower Hill council tenants on rent strike, culminating in the imprisonment of some tenants (9). Joe Carberry, who was actively involved in the campaign, explained:

A few Birds Eye stewards lived on Tower Hill and were involved in the rent strike themselves, like Billy Castley from the cold

store. One of the things we discussed at the time was that a community based tenants strike would not be successful unless it was allied to some form of industrial action. That was the position the Tower Hill Fair Rents Action Group actually took. So they had a go at bringing the factory out on a day's stoppage and the Tower Hill group actually picketed the factory, with women and prams, and that. They caused massive chaos.

Appealing for a factory stoppage was almost certainly premature given that it took a few months before Tower Hill's rent strike was joined by most of the other council housing estates in Kirkby. Yet as Joe Carberry added: 'It didn't succeed - some came out, some went in - but it created a hell of a stir'.

Notwithstanding its strengths the shop stewards' organisation in Birds Eye also had significant weaknesses during the early 1970s. To begin with, there was the break-up of its bastion of strength in the cold-store department. In 1973 the plant's Personnel Manager set up an internal inquiry into the shopfloor industrial relations situation in the department. The Convenor, Bobbie Lamb, and two other senior stewards from the negotiating committee, agreed to participate in its deliberations because they were concerned the future of the factory was being threatened by constant stoppages of work disrupting production. Despite the indignant protests of the cold-store stewards the inquiry report recommended a reduction of the department's 60-strong workforce and the dispersal of some of its palletising operations throughout the rest of the plant. Management

subsequently offered a much enhanced voluntary redundancy deal aimed at enticing those not willing to be re-deployed to leave the factory. Much to their satisfaction and to the union's horror 26 cold-store workers, including some of the best militants and shop stewards, took the money, which at £800 was a considerable lump sum at the time. It left the cold-store department with only about 30 workers. The break-up of the cold-store - even though it retained some of its potential industrial muscle - dealt a severe body blow to the strength of the shop stewards' organisation in the plant and highlighted the underlying ambivalent attitude taken by Bobbie Lamb towards sectional stoppages. As the stewards' minute books reveal, in the aftermath of this event, the number of disputes markedly declined.

Another factor weakening steward organisation was the sexual division of labour in the plant. During the late 1960s, at a time when the food-processing industry was expanding at a rapid pace, the Kirkby management welcomed women workers who ideally fitted their need for young, flexible and unskilled labour. Although women welcomed this new employment they were at a distinct disadvantage to male workers. Marriage and motherhood effectively 'deskilled' women, preparing them for only unskilled or semi-skilled work on the assembly lines. Male workers tended to gravitate towards work which was either skilled or which offered the opportunity of substantial overtime, or both. As a consequence, the rates of pay women received were well below those paid to male workers. Although the basic pay structure remained the same for everyone (after an equal pay deal in 1972) the factory's job evaluation scheme introduced in 1971 - which slotted people into job rates according to skill - entrenched a significant pay differential between men and women. The result could be the

difference between a woman day-shift production-line worker on a job rate of 90p compared with a male shift worker operating machinery on a job rate of £4.35p. Moreover, the division of labour was compounded by some stewards' attempts to protect the bargaining position of men's jobs. For example, the palletising job at the end of an assembly line was traditionally carried out by a man because it usually involved some heavy labour. But as Mary Scoggins, a rank and file union member who worked for many years in the beefburger/steaklit department explained, this had a double-edged effect:

If management happened to be short of male labour they'd quite often look towards the women. So what the shop stewards did was get them to agree that whenever that situation arose they would always put 2 women onto 1 man's job. Obviously, that suited the women because they could share out the work between them and the men were happy because they knew they would always be able to walk back into the job. You never got a take-over position. It would only be a temporary arrangement.

Some male stewards were prepared, alongside the relatively few women on the stewards' committee, to make attempts to alleviate the disadvantageous conditions women workers found themselves in. For example, Bobbie Lamb negotiated an equal pay agreement and formally pursued with the company a claim for paid maternity leave (10). Moreover, one important factor facilitating a breakdown of barriers was the stoppages

of work which emphasised the interdependence of male and female workers vis-a-vis management. As Mary Scoggins explained:

If the men who did all the heavy physical jobs decided they were refusing to do a job because it was too dirty or something, they'd go to the women and say 'will you support us - we know it'll affect your bonus - but we need your support'. And the women would say 'Ok, yeah, we'll support you'. And the same thing would happen if the women walked off the job and went to the men. They'd say 'we can't work with that machine'. And the men would back them up - even if it meant they lost their bonus as a result. There was no real animosity when it came down to it in that sense.

But many stewards did accept the in-built demarcation between men and womens jobs even though the overwhelming beneficiary of this arrangement was management - far outweighing any advantages and disadvantages between men and women themselves.

Another underlying weakness of the Birds Eye stewards' was that, although the formation of a negotiating committee in 1971 had the effect of ensuring a more collective style of leadership than the completely Convenor dominated approach that used to prevail, the senior stewards did not share Bobble Lamb's combative and strategic stance towards management. Their willingness to engage in militant activity was more pragmatically based and contingent on sectional pressures and they regarded him as being 'too political'. Paul Chin outlined the different approach:

Bobbie was always looking for progression, improvements in one thing or another, if you know what I mean. But with the others on the negotiating committee nothing happened unless the company made it happen. Rather than go to the company and say 'we'll be seeking this, that and the other' it would be the company who came up with an idea for change and then reacting to it: 'yes, we'll go along with it, or no we won't'.

The negotiating committee stewards were often reluctant to give their unequivocal backing to Bobbie Lamb's occasional requests for industrial action across the whole factory aimed at strengthening his hand in negotiations with management over particular issues. Eventually in late 1975, after being rebuffed on a number of occasions, Bobbie Lamb took the dramatic step of resigning from his position as Convenor (although remaining a departmental steward) whereupon the five other senior stewards, including the deputy Convenor Joe Barton, resigned from the negotiating committee (although most remained as departmental stewards). It was an extremely serious loss to the cohesion of the stewards' body and opened up the second major phase of shopfloor struggle that can be identified, during which the balance of bargaining power inside the Birds Eye plant tilted towards the advantage of management. The new Convenor, George Knight, was much older than Bobbie Lamb, and as a moderate Labour Party member was also from a completely different political background. His main concern appeared to be to build up a new co-operative relationship with management. Joe Carberry outlined his different approach:

George was very much a mediator. He wouldn't take a hard line on anything - he always tended to take the soft option. And he was a-political. Those were the main differences with Bobbie. George was one of those fellas who would sit down with the management and say 'I'm a professional and you're a professional - can't we do a deal?'. It was that type of relationship with the company.

According to the stewards' and union branch minutes there was not one single dispute inside the factory during 1976. Of course, it would be wrong to assume this reflected a complete collapse of confidence on the shopfloor and a willingness of all stewards to acquiesce in managerial prerogative. Over the previous two years a handful of younger and more political union activists - including Joe Carberry - had already begun to transform the TGWU branch into a lively forum for argument and debate, adopting left-wing policies on a whole range of issues (such as the commitment not to cross workers' picket lines) and having been newly elected as stewards they were also able, at least in some areas of the factory, to make important shopfloor gains. For example, on the permanent night shift in the cooked foods department, the stewards pushed their members from the lowest band within the job evaluation scheme (£1) to the highest (£4.35p) through good sectional bargaining backed up with the threat of industrial action.

Nonetheless, it was only to be the lull before the storm. During 1976 the full implications of the threat posed to workplace union organisation at the Kirkby plant gradually became apparent when Birds Eye

unveiled their 'Five Year Plan' which threatened a major re-organisation of production affecting all the company's frozen food plants with the long-term aim of introducing new technology. Amidst promises of a massive investment programme in the Kirkby factory the company stated its intention of transferring production of some of its major product ranges - steaklits, beefburgers and all fish-based products - to other plants within the group combined with drastic changes to established working practices in the plant, including the introduction of a new double-day shift.

The threat posed to the Kirkby site by the company's 'Five Year Plan' and discontent with the bargaining ineffectiveness of the new Convenor resulted in a vote of no confidence at a stewards' committee meeting and at the end of 1976 the return of Bobbie Lamb to the Convenor's position. At the same time, two of the 'old guard' senior stewards who had previously resigned from the negotiating committee were re-elected, along with a couple of younger, militant stewards.

*** 1977-1979: offensive and counter-offensive**

The changed composition of the shop stewards' leadership ushered in the third phase of the struggle inside the Kirkby plant. As Paul Chin explained:

Whereas people hadn't supported Bobbie before, they wanted him back because he was the only one who could do the job properly. Then you saw a change of tactics, because Bobbie now got more support than ever. It made a hell of a lot of difference. In

his mind, Bobbie was as militant as he always was, prepared to use industrial muscle to achieve things. He was shrewed enough to know when to push the stewards into action or not. But his ability to get things done was vastly improved. For instance, he instigated negotiations for a maternity agreement for women. Previously he would have had difficulty in getting support for that through the stewards' committee - because it was male chauvinist. But after the experience of George Knight they backed him on it.

Certainly, Bobbie Lamb's return at the beginning of 1977 appears to have re-vitalised the self-esteem and authority of the stewards' organisation in general and the younger more political stewards in particular. Moreover, it seemed to unleash the latent discontent over wage restraint that existed on the shopfloor. During the first few weeks of the new year a sudden wave of sectional strike activity swept the plant - with stoppages in the butchery, chicken stripping and freeze and case departments - as union organisation began to reassert its power and regain some of the ground it had lost. The disputes were of an offensive nature with stewards demanding extra job rates or bonus payments. Then, in February, a new bout of union militancy erupted on the 'racque' pie line in the cooked foods department where management had introduced new automated meat dispensing machinery, that had led to a re-deployment of a number of women workers elsewhere in the factory. The 'racque' line was seen as symptomatic of the production changes sought by the company as outlined in their 'Five Year Plan' and under Bobbie Lamb's leadership the stewards'

organisation prepared its strategic response - to fight for increased bonus payments for the extra job responsibilities required. It required a two-day factory-wide stoppage to force management into a temporary agreement to increase payments to female workers, although the deal was never implemented (11).

After months of management evasion the issue finally exploded in August 1977 when the stewards' committee called an all-out strike, linking the issue of a £7 bonus for running the new 'racque' line with the wider question of the threat posed to the Kirkby plant by the centralisation of products and 'Five Year Plan'. Pickets manned the gates in Kirkby and a delegation of strikers lobbied the other two Birds Eye plants that were part of the same national pay negotiating set-up appealing for solidarity action. Yarmouth agreed to impose an immediate overtime ban but when Lowestoft shop stewards refused to offer support the Kirkby strikers mounted a picket on the gate. Whilst the production workers - who had a very weak union organisation - ignored the appeal for solidarity the blockade did have an immediate and dramatic effect when the Unispeed lorry drivers - also members of the TGWU - refused to cross the picket lines. Unable to move anything in or out the factory was effectively paralysed and after two weeks Birds Eye finally backed down and agreed to make a £5 productivity payment. It was a significant victory and the stewards' committee was jubilant with the outcome. Unfortunately, it proved to be a false dawn.

The workers' offensive was met with a management counter-offensive when the Kirkby plant's 80 AUEW engineering craftsmen were forced out on strike a couple of weeks later, after management suspended all

negotiations on their annual pay claim. TGWU stewards were approached by the company and informed that if they allowed supervisors and managers to take over the striking engineers' jobs they would attempt to provide work for some of their members, although most would be laid-off without pay. They assumed that as the engineers had refused to respect the TGWU's picket lines in their own recent dispute they would be willing to do the same now. But following an emergency meeting the stewards' committee voted unanimously to support the engineers' strike and invoked union branch policy on lay-offs of 'one-out, all-out'. The stewards mounted a picket line alongside the engineers and appealed to their members not to cross and in a magnificent display of solidarity only 197 out of some 1,300 TGWU members broke the union's ranks to go into work. Two days later the company announced a complete shut-down of the factory and the lay-off of the entire workforce until the engineers' strike was resolved. Yet the management lock-out proved to be only the start of a long bitter dispute with the company that was to last for no less than four and a half months, between October 1977 - March 1978, before finally ending in workers' ignominious defeat. Joe Carberry recalled the predicament the stewards found themselves in:

We thought it would last a week or two. But after a while it became obvious the engineers had walked into a closed door. Five weeks into the strike the company called the engineers to a meeting and produced a 5-point plan for the resumption of work. The engineers took it away and agreed to accept 3 of the points and went back to the company suggesting compromise on

the other 2 points. But the company then produced a 7-point plan. And that's how their negotiations went. Every time they met the company they'd get so far and then no further because the company would add something else on. It was a deliberate ploy to prolong the dispute.

The TGWU and AUEW shop stewards formed a 'Joint Liaison Committee' which met weekly to co-ordinate activities, organise picketing of the plant by both union's members and campaign for financial support throughout the Merseyside area. A number of mass meetings and a huge trade union solidarity demonstration in Kirkby reaffirmed the members support for their stewards' defiant stance (12). Yet, as the months went by without a resolution of the engineers' dispute, it became apparent corporate Birds Eye management would only consider re-opening the plant after completely new contracts of employment for both TGWU production workers and AUEW strikers had been signed. Despite continuing defiance from the Joint Liaison Committee, tremendous pressure to recommend acceptance of the company's terms was placed on the stewards by national full-time TGWU and AUEW officials. After holding secret meetings with the company in London they eventually foisted an agreement on the Kirkby workforce that conceded the union's unconditional surrender to the company in exchange for a return to work. The capitulation included amongst other things: 340 redundancies amongst the TGWU production workers, the loss of the previously agreed bonus payment for the 'racque' line, the replacement of the women's twilight shift by compulsory double day-shift working, the introduction of a new 3-shift system for some male workers, and the replacement of all

bonus schemes by a new 'balanced pay structure' involving measured day work (as well as the loss of a third of the engineers' jobs).

Whether Kirkby management had deliberately provoked the engineers into taking strike action - as many people subsequently claimed - is impossible to confirm. But there is no doubt the lock-out provided Birds Eye with the perfect opportunity, not only to speed ahead with its 'Five Year Plan' transfer of certain products from Kirkby to other sites, but also to prepare the ground for a complete re-organisation of production in the Merseyside factory. It was the start of a new era for the Kirkby plant, a massive new investment programme in which the nature of production was transformed from the old manually operated system to brand new 'state of the art' automated assembly lines with 'multi-vacuum' self-sealing packaging machinery. The beefburger/steaklit and fish departments were completely closed down and the chicken-stripping department was transferred to a new area of the factory. But the most important development was the transfer of the old cooked foods department to a completely renovated building complex known as 'Unit 2', where brand new high-technology assembly lines were installed. Employing over 600 men and women - all of whom now worked a rotating double-day shift - it became the largest department on the site.

Despite the fact the shop stewards' organisation remained intact - after having continued to meet and organise during the lock-out - it suffered a severe set-back. The return-to-work package reached by the national union officials placed massive constraints on stewards' negotiating capabilities, giving management carte blanche to re-organise production. Although the 350 redundancies were eventually agreed

voluntarily the balance of bargaining power now swung right back in favour of management. Paul Chin remembered the stewards' loss of confidence:

From the outset we went back very much with our tail between our legs. The morale was fairly low, obviously after a major defeat like that. From the T and G point of view there was a lot of acquiescence for about the first six months. Management were quite cocky. In certain departments the supervisors were dictatorial. They'd say 'well, if you don't like it you know where you can go'. But stewards had to step back from the brink, because we'd lost a lot of members, people had been out of work for four months, you knew they couldn't be motivated into action. To a great extent the company were laughing at us for a few months.

Management took advantage of the steward's bargaining weakness allowing the short-fall in labour created by the redundancies to be overcome by moving workers from one department to another at management's discretion. Also Birds Eye ended the element of local pay determination in the factory, introducing what they termed a 'balanced pay structure' that combined job and basic rates and had the effect of significantly widening the differentials between male and female workers to £3, £3.50, £8.50 or even as much as £17 a week between a day shift woman worker and a new 3-shift male worker.

Paradoxically, although the stewards' organisation was initially seriously undermined by the complete re-organisation of

production in the factory it was able to gradually recover some of its bargaining strength, at least in some areas of the new Unit 2 cooked foods department, where the installation of the new technology and assembly lines proceeded apace. Stewards in this department were able to exploit management's predicament - faced with 'state of the art' machinery that proved impossible to operate on the manning levels originally imposed - to successfully increase the numbers employed on the new 'multi-vac' assembly lines. Perhaps the best agreements were negotiated by shop stewards representing the 3-shift male workers in the new prepared foods section of Unit 2 where they were able to push up the level from 9 to nearly 30 per shift. The presence of two or three of the most militant and political stewards in the factory within this particular area was a key in securing the new labour. Of course, management clearly envisaged such an arrangement as only a short-term measure until all the machinery was firmly in place and working smoothly. To cover the transition period, they began to recruit new labour into the plant on 6-week fixed term contracts. Although the shop stewards' committee expressed its opposition to this stop-gap measure, in favour of the employment of a permanent workforce, they were overruled by full-time union officials. But after a few months' experiment the stewards' body took the initiative and imposed a factory-wide overtime ban to force management to abandon the use of short-term contracts. Within 24 hours the company had backed down and given an assurance that only permanent labour would henceforth be taken on (13).

Undoubtedly, it was the massive new investment programme and accompanying increased factory output that strengthened the stewards' bargaining leverage and gave them the confidence to act. Plant management's

concern to keep production running - amidst the launch of the MenuMaster range - meant ever greater numbers of new workers were hired and manning levels in the factory practically reached their pre-1978 lock-out level. By February 1979 the stewards' committee felt strong enough to organise a 2-day factory wide stoppage over a demarcation dispute, involving two union members suspended for refusing to do engineering workers' jobs (14). It was a further illustration that the stewards' body was beginning to recover its strength after the lock-out. Of course, the level of union organisation was still extremely uneven; even in the new Unit 2 department there was only one sectional stoppage - over a safety issue (15). Elsewhere, shopfloor peace reigned during 1978-9 despite the imposed new shift patterns and working practices. Certainly, the pendulum of advantage - in terms of the balance of bargaining power - still lay overwhelmingly in the hands of management. Yet the stewards' organisation - at least in some sections of the factory - was gradually beginning to retrieve some of the ground it had lost.

Yet the process of recovery was short-circuited at the end of 1979 when Bobbie Lamb resigned as Convenor, this time to take up a full-time District Officer's position within the Merseyside Region of the TGWU. It heralded a new era in the fortunes of the Birds Eye stewards' leadership and its relationship to management, which coincided with the period of the 1980s.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1980s

*** the early 1980s: 'don't rock the boat':**

The early 1980s economic recession saw an avalanche of redundancies and closures in the Merseyside area - including Dunlop Speke, Meccano and Tate and Lyle - and Birds Eye's persistent threat to shut the Kirkby plant down unless efficiency was improved hung like a dark cloud over the stewards' heads, further reinforcing a siege-like mentality. The election of Joe Barton as the new Convenor was also a key new factor in the situation. He abandoned the militant and political leadership style adopted by Bobbie Lamb in favour of a new 'co-operative' approach towards management on the basis that only by keeping their heads down and trying to make the plant as viable as possible could workers hope to retain their jobs in the long term. In return for exercising his authority over rank and file members' wildcat action he sought demonstrable improvements in working conditions through a 'strong bargaining relationship' with management. Having invested £10 million in new machinery and assembly lines Birds Eye now launched a number of new products in the Kirkby plant and with production levels rising substantially the factory operated at nearly full capacity. In these circumstances, Kirkby management were not only prepared but willing to make some real, albeit limited, concessions to shopfloor union organisation, whilst still retaining a distinct advantage in the bargaining relationship.

John Morgan started work at Birds Eye in 1975 in the freeze and case department, immediately becoming active in the TGWU branch and elected onto the branch committee at the age of 24. From 1978 he worked on the 3-shift system in the prepared foods section of Unit 2, the largest department in the factory, and became a shop steward in 1980. He described the new Convenor's conciliatory approach towards management:

There was very definitely a more co-operative relationship with the management. Don't get me wrong - Joe was never weak with management. He would go in and negotiate and get rewards. But he didn't have to go in like Bobbie Lamb with his entourage behind him, banging the table and calling people out. He would do it quietly. He'd say 'this is what people want and we can come to some sort of arrangement on it'.

Joe Carberry, who also worked in the 3-shift area of Unit 2 during the 1980s, echoed this description:

Joe's air of co-operation was a lot greater than Bob's ever was. Joe was a pragmatist. He was the type who would say 'listen you've got to be realistic about this'. There was a mutual love society that seemed to develop between the union and the company. They would give us certain things and we would give them certain things...Joe would bend to certain pressures, of course. He would always push an issue. But the basic difference was how far an issue should be pushed. If we had an

issue that we thought was strong enough and we should push - Joe would say 'No, what we'll do is keep it in procedure'. Joe was a great procedure man. There were plenty of times we could have had a major dispute but we used to step back because Joe wasn't a fighter in that sense. Any issue that looked as if it was going to lead to a dispute was fairly quickly circumvented. He'd get involved and say 'You're not doing that'. The saying for Joe Barton, especially among the 3-shift workers, was 'Don't rock the boat lads'.

Billy Caldwell, a rank and file union activist, worked in Birds Eye from 1977, for the most part in the Unit 2 department, where he served as a shop steward for a couple of years in the early 1980s, and was a committed, although independent, socialist. He pointed out the key political difference between Joe Barton and Bobbie Lamb:

Bobbie Lamb was very much a political figure, a Labour Party man. Under his stewardship the branch took on a definite political shade. He would allow a fair amount of political discussion. Joe Barton tended to divorce politics entirely from trade union organisation. With him it was purely an industrial, trade union business. He went in, did his job and went home, and that was it. So under Joe Barton there was a political vacuum. The stewards from the 70s had never been political in terms of party politics but they had been politically motivated

in terms of industrial politics. But that type of politics gradually disappeared.

Literally within a few weeks of assuming the Convenor's position Joe Barton was attempting to stamp his new found authority and restraining influence on the shopfloor militancy that had begun to develop within the 3-shift area of the new Unit 2 cooked foods department. With new Birds Eye products coming on stream it was an area constantly changing and under pressure from departmental managers hell-bent on imposing new 'efficient' working practices. Flexibility of labour and job demarcation lay at the heart of the constant disputes between the 3-shift stewards and managers. As the first stage in the production process it effectively became the 'new cold-store' in reverse, the centre of militancy in the factory, wielding enormous potential industrial muscle. The all-male workforce operated as a close-knit self-contained unit in a 'free working' environment - rather than being tied to an assembly line. With the help of two or three militant shop stewards they were able to build up strong sectional trade union organisation.

But from the very beginning Joe Barton made it clear he would not countenance disputes. At a heated emergency stewards' meeting in October 1979 - called to discuss a walk-out by the 3-shift area in a dispute over manning levels - the new Convenor argued vigorously for the strike to be called off, even though management's stance represented a direct challenge to union negotiating rights. It was only the company's sudden imposition of selected lay-offs that pulled the carpet from under his feet; the stewards' committee invoked the 'one-out, all-out' policy and

the factory was completely closed down for two weeks before a compromise settlement was reached (16). The new Convenor was more successful in March 1980 when he used his casting vote at a stewards' meeting against supporting another walk-out in the 3-shift area over demarcation. He argued in favour of allowing management to man-up the strikers' jobs, thereby forcing the strikers' return to work on the company's terms (17). Joe Carberry recalled the frustration he felt as a departmental steward in the 3-shift area:

Basically, they would negotiate, co-operate, do everything other than call a dispute. To give examples, I would be here all day long, there were that many. So many times we stepped back from the brink and said 'no'. A lot of the issues were to do with flexibility. They wanted to move us to other areas - but we wouldn't budge. When we used to put the arguments on flexibility to Joe in the context of having a dispute over it - Joe would always say 'You're not going to win that because we've got a factory-wide agreement that gives them 100 per cent flexibility. What makes you think you're so bleeding different in the 3-shift area?'.

Brenda Carberry - Joe's wife - also worked at Birds Eye during the 1980s, on the multi-vac assembly lines in Unit 2. She explained how Joe Barton's 'Don't rock the boat' philosophy also applied to the less well organised sections of the factory:

There were a number of times when the women would walk off the lines, 9 times out of 10 because of the cold. We were handling frozen meat and it was freezing. They wouldn't even give us jackets to wear. They were just spontaneous walk-outs but we were always slapped like naughty girls 'get back to work'. The stoppage would last until the Convenor came down and said 'Right, get to work girls and I'll go and sort it out'. But he never did.

There was a very marked decline in the number of sectional stoppages during the early 1980s, only about 4 or 5 a year across the whole factory and despite the relative strength of the 3-shift area and the occasional stoppage on the lines in Unit 2, disputes were generally much more volatile, short-lived and unsuccessful compared with the 1970s. Of course, in part, this was due to the impact inside the plant of a hostile economic and political environment, notably the recession, shake-out of jobs and major defeats for sections of the British working class movement, notably the miners' in 1984-5. As John Morgan acknowledged:

The effect was apathy amongst the workers. They saw very well-organised groups of workers being defeated and the attitude that became inbred was 'we cannot win'. Because of Thatcher you started hearing rumourings that the trade union movement was finished. You had to argue with your own membership and convince them that trade unionism was still alive and kicking.

But the Convenor's disapproval of strikes inside the Birds Eye plant also contributed to this lack of confidence on the shopfloor. Pouring cold water on those isolated sparks of rank and file resistance that did occasionally ignite only further reinforced the belief that 'we cannot win'. Although the handful of shop stewards in the 3-shift area gained a reputation across the factory for their militancy they were in a distinct minority on the stewards' committee as a whole and the senior stewards never really questioned Joe Barton's activities. Indeed, the negotiating committee's role was gradually transformed from a body that made collective decisions on bargaining and strategy to essentially no more than a vehicle through which management transmitted its ideas. John Morgan explained:

In the early '80s the negotiating committee didn't function. It was there in name only. The company would send for them if they wanted to introduce third-party meat into the factory, introduce new products or if there was a serious failure to agree on a factory-wide basis. They got involved in departmental disputes to tell people they were out of line - they were wildcatting. But apart from that it played a very low key role. Otherwise the company just went direct to the Convenor.

As the general economic situation outside the plant deteriorated the politics of survival inside it under Joe Barton's leadership proved a more unifying factor than any alternative which the

left stewards, marginalised within the 3-shift area, were able to provide. Joe Barton was able to keep in check those elements within the stewards' body who were more active and militant by relying on those who were more passive and less antagonistic to management, balancing the majority of the stewards against the minority prepared to fight. In the short-term, this policy created an element of stability in workplace industrial relations, but in the long-term it had extremely damaging consequences for shopfloor union organisation.

Joe Barton was able to justify his intense aversion to shopfloor militancy by pointing to a variety of concessions he was able to obtain through an alternative 'strong bargaining relations' approach to management. Yet even a summary examination of these gains reveals their strict limitations. It is true manning levels were substantially increased in Unit 2 through shopfloor bargaining and Joe Barton broke completely new ground by getting management to finally concede a bereavement leave agreement (for close family relations) and a medical leave agreement (for hospital and dental appointments) with paid time-off work. He also negotiated a reduction in the working week from 40 hours to 39 hours. As Billy Caldwell acknowledged: 'The company agreed to things Bob Lamb could never get off them - Joe got them just like that. He'd get up a meeting with the members and say 'Lambie couldn't get this, look how I've got that'. On the face of it, such negotiated concessions seem impressive; they certainly boosted Joe Barton's esteem and authority amongst rank and file shopfloor workers. Yet, the underlying reality was rather less convincing.

To begin with, the increase in manning levels in Unit 2, particularly the 3-shift area, was won almost exclusively through the

efforts of sectional stewards, rather than the Convenor. As for the other gains, they clearly did not cost the company very much and nothing of substance, in terms of any real improvement in working conditions, was conceded. In fact, when it came to the reduction in the working week, the contrary was the case. Joe Barton actually presented the company with an offer they could not refuse; the production of 40 hours work within 39 hours. In effect, the concessions from management were readily traded-off in return for stewards' compliance with wide-ranging flexibility aimed at boosting production output, which in the long term only served to undermine workers' hard-won shopfloor conditions.

Nonetheless, the substantive pressures and incentives towards more conciliatory bargaining relations and a less militant perspective should not be underestimated. For many workers these gains, however limited in nature, were real enough and appeared to confirm the merits of a strategy of accommodation rather than confrontation. It meant fewer strikes, less disruption to production and the security of employment amidst a hostile environment; in the circumstances an alternative militant approach to management appeared merely self-destructive. In this sense, Joe Barton's routinised bargaining relations were located within and made possible by actual material conditions and their reflection in shopfloor workers' consciousness. The real problem was that the stewards' plant-level 'strong bargaining relations' helped to demobilise collective rank and file activity.

The unevenness in stewards' bargaining leverage between different sections of the plant evident in the 1970s, became even more marked in the 1980s, especially between the relatively much better

organised all-male departments - such as the 3-shift area, the butchery department and the cold-store - compared with the much less well-organised all-women chicken stripping department and mixed male and female assembly area of Unit 2. This was a consequence, partly of workers' varying strategic relationship to production, partly of the different organisation of work, partly of the type of management approach adopted, and partly the type of shop stewards' leadership provided. Many groups of both male and female workers -independently of their shop stewards - had managed to carve out some control over their jobs by operating the 'welt system', an unofficial system of covering for absent colleagues on a tea break. It was evidence of workers' collective organisation used to relieve the grinding monotony of the job and to undermine management's discipline.

But the practice also had its weaknesses, which is probably why management for the most part came to tolerate the practice. Not only did it sometimes mean a group of workers probably worked even more 'efficiently' than they might otherwise have done but it could also have the effect of backfiring against other sections of workers. Brenda Carberry described how the ingenious use of the practice by some men created antagonisms amongst some women on the lines:

What happened was they didn't just work the 'welt', they worked the 'welt on the welt'. Say 2 people started work at 6 o'clock in the morning. Well, someone would take the first break until half-past 6 and then come in - and the other person then went off until 7 o'clock. But what actually happened was that one would go off at twenty five past six and his relief wouldn't

come in until twenty five to seven. Then one would go off again at five to and the other wouldn't take over until five past. So they weren't ever putting half-an-hour in. But that left the women on the line shouting "where's the work he's supposed to be supplying us with". And we'd be left stuck on the line for nearly two hours because our relief was only one-in-five.

Instead of fighting for the women to be granted a better relief system, to level the organisation upwards, the stewards were more concerned not to do anything that might jeopardise the men's relatively advantageous position. Even though the introduction of new technology provided new possibilities there was very little breakdown of the strict demarcation between male and female jobs in the factory during the 1980s. Brenda Carberry recalled: "The Convenor was even known to have said: 'A woman will get on a fork-lift truck over my dead body' ". Finally, the earnings of the women compared with the men continued to be vastly inferior, partly as a result of the new 'balanced pay structure' imposed on the stewards after the lock-out but also because most male workers tended to work high rates of overtime and were granted better holiday pay compared with most women workers. Unfortunately, although unity between male and female workers was undoubtedly possible it was not in any way facilitated by the virtual collapse of sectional disputes that occurred in the factory during the 1980s, in part a consequence of the 'Don't rock the boat' philosophy.

Paradoxically, despite the marked decline in sectional stoppages of work the Birds Eye shop stewards organised a number of all-out

plant wide demonstration strikes. At first glance, this paradox may appear incongruous, but appearances can often be deceptive, masking the reality underlying them. The nature of the disputes provides an important measure of their overall significance.

In May 1980 the stewards organised a one-day stoppage of the factory in support of the TUC's Day of Action against the Tory government anti-union legislation (18); in June and September of 1982 they organised two one-day stoppages of the plant, in pursuance of the Birds Eye national wage claim, and as part of the TUC Day of Action in support of hospital workers (19); in March and July of 1984 there were two one-day plant-wide strikes, in support of Liverpool City Council and against the redundancy terms being offered for closure of the Birds Eye Yarmouth plant (20); and in September 1985, the plant was brought to a halt for three days when stewards convinced their members not to cross a picket line set up by strikers from the Gloucester Birds Eye plant (21).

On the one hand, the Kirkby stewards' ability to organise such action showed that they had by no means been completely co-opted by management and illustrated the potential industrial muscle that could still be wielded; the willingness of rank and file members to follow their stewards' lead revealed a deep commitment to basic trade union principles of unity and solidarity and was a testimony to the continuing resilience of workplace union organisation in the plant despite the setback inflicted during the 1977-8 lock-out and the series of workers' defeats inside the British labour movement generally. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to ignore the actual limitations that were simultaneously in-built into these stoppages. Firstly, every one of them -

except the dispute in support of the Gloucester strikers - was initiated not by the Kirkby shop stewards themselves but by full-time trade union officials. Secondly, strictly speaking only one of the stoppages, that concerning the pay claim in 1982, directly affected the day-to-day battle on the shopfloor between workers and management in the Birds Eye Kirkby plant itself, and even that was something that could only be negotiated above factory level. By contrast, virtually every one of the other disputes was a solidarity strike, taken not so much to extract concessions from Kirkby management but rather to show support for other sections of the working class, whether it was within the Birds Eye group (as in the case of the disputes backing the Yarmouth and Gloucester plants) or outside it (as in the case of those backing hospital workers and Liverpool City Council). The key point here is that such solidarity action for external reasons was not paralleled by and translated into shopfloor bargaining relations internally within the Kirkby plant itself. It is not a question of counterposing one to the other. Arguably, building solidarity for other sections of workers could have been used as an important mechanism for restoring shopfloor morale and rebuilding an organised core of opposition to management at local level, the one could have fed into the other. Instead, what happened was that the one effectively became a substitute for the other.

There was certainly the potential to revitalise shopfloor organisation across the plant but as Joe Carberry explained, the stewards did not seek to exploit the situation to their advantage:

We specialised in the MenuMaster range on the multi-vacs. Well, I think it took the company by surprise. It took off better than their wildest dreams, it was one of our best sellers, we actually couldn't make enough for the market. So the factory was booming. After 1983 some stewards felt more confident that with investment still going into the place that the time to sit back was finished. We should now progress the aspirations of our members and push the company a little further every time. But that didn't materialise because as far as Joe Barton was concerned the factory was always in a tenuous state. He wouldn't recognise there was a strength of feeling building up from amongst the stewards and from the members as to the terms and conditions they were employed under. We were always told 'No, it's not the right time to strike'. But it was never the right time to strike. We kept being told we shouldn't go for this, we shouldn't go for that, we shouldn't go for the other. Joe Barton would say: 'we've got to keep our powder dry'.

But 'keeping the power dry' over a prolonged period of time was a self-defeating exercise. Despite the willingness of the Kirkby senior stewards to organise the occasional one-day plant-wide stoppage of work in support of other workers they were consciously opposed to the encouragement of similar activity against their own management. Not only did this strategy weaken their potential bargaining position on the shopfloor (and their relationship to rank and file members) but it also

meant that when their organisation was put to the decisive test in the late 1980s it was unable to deliver.

*** 1985-9: the downward slope**

The closure of the butchery and chicken-stripping departments inside the Kirkby plant in 1985 and 1986 without any effective shopfloor resistance further weakened the strength of the stewards' organisation. Although the chicken department stewards appealed to the stewards' committee for plant-wide strike action to resist the closure a tactical blunder combined with the years of damage to shopfloor union organisation threw away the chance of victory. Joe Carberry explained what happened:

There was an argument on the stewards' committee over the timing of a call for a stoppage. The chicken-room stewards wanted to take the issue immediately to a mass meeting of the members in the November. A number of us, including Joe Barton, argued against this, that the time would not be right until after Christmas. But the stewards' committee voted to call a meeting that Saturday and recommend a stoppage. It was a highly charged atmosphere because it was such an integral part of the site and had been for many years. A lot of stewards were really angry and felt we had to stand up and fight. But the membership overturned us. We felt we could have got them behind us if we had gone to them in the January. But all we could do was go

back to the company with our tail between legs and negotiate the closure.

Almost inevitably the 'Don't rock the boat' policy had begun to catch up with the stewards' committee. Instead of encouraging an immediate strike in the chicken-stripping department and then building for support in every section before appealing for an all-out strike the stewards' hesitant and divided stance merely fed the doubts and lack of confidence they had themselves contributed to so much in the past. The closure of the butchery and chicken-stripping departments left only the Unit 2 area of the factory functioning. Although there were no compulsory redundancies there was a steady decline in the numbers employed in the plant between 1985-9 - it was calculated that about 270 jobs were lost - partly through voluntary redundancy, but mainly as a result of natural wastage, as vacant positions were filled by labour transferred internally rather than brought in from outside.

Meanwhile, Birds Eye had embarked on a long-term plan termed 'Workstyle' aimed at introducing radical new working practices into its plants across the country, provoking the 1985 strike at Gloucester which spread to Kirkby. The Kirkby stewards' negotiating committee initially resisted Workstyle because of the threat it posed to working conditions and job security but by 1987 they had approached management themselves to have Workstyle brought in, partly because with a £7.50 a week supplement workers at the Gloucester and Lowestoft plants were earning more money than at Kirkby, and partly because the massive new investment made at the two plants to accompany Workstyle was desperately wanted in Kirkby as a

demonstration of the company's long-term commitment to the plant. But as John Morgan acknowledged the stewards had myopic expectations:

What the Factory General Manager did at first was pull the wool over our eyes. He told us the introduction of Workstyle would not lead to redundancies. It would be phased in and a continuation of the levels of natural wastage we had over the last 5 years would take care of the reduction of labour. Its introduction would be subject to agreement from a monitoring group set up in the factory with the negotiating committee being represented. So we thought 'OK, we'll accept that'. We will go in and negotiate what for us was a lifeline to better pay and conditions. And a number of stewards including myself went and visited the other factories to see 'Workstyle' in operation.

But it soon became clear there would be no real consultation or negotiation over Workstyle whatsoever. At the end of 1987, two new Kirkby plant managers, Ted Cowan (Personnel Manager) and Mark Fitzpatrick (Factory General Manager), were appointed and immediately confronted the stewards with draconian terms for the introduction of Workstyle. As John Morgan explained:

We knew that Workstyle would mean losing jobs. We thought we would lose about 60 people. But the company's conception was that we'd lose 380 jobs, a third of the workforce. That was

unpalatable to us. My department in the 3-shift area was going to be ravaged. Where we had 29 a shift we would have 11. We argued the department couldn't work on that. The whole thing was a farce. The reaction from the stewards body was 'there is no way you're going to get away with it'.

Whilst the stewards were prepared, in principle, to accept a number of redundancies, the financial terms offered by Birds Eye were completely unpalatable. Although they were prepared, in principle, to accept radical new working practices the company's insistence on imposing them with no negotiation was also unacceptable. But the real sticking point for the stewards was the company's refusal to give a firm commitment to future investment in the Kirkby plant to secure its long term future, even though this had occurred at the other Birds Eye plants that had accepted Workstyle. The stewards' resistance took the form of boycotting all formal negotiations with plant level management for over two years with an insistence on a company investment plan as a precondition of its introduction. At the end of 1988 a ballot of the workforce overwhelmingly backed the stewards' stance.

Finally in March 1989 Birds Eye announced the plant would be shut down with the loss of almost 1,000 jobs, blaming the decision on the workforce's failure to agree to changes in working practices, to increase productivity and to accept 380 redundancies. In fact, the real reason for the closure was the cut-throat battle with competitors that challenged Birds Eye's former supremacy within the frozen food industry. The company had lost a third of its market share in the previous ten years

and was determined to protect profits by making workers pay. Having already slashed 5,000 production jobs in other plants "in pursuit of maximum efficiency" the Kirkby factory was merely the latest casualty (22). At the same time, in the run-up to the removal of trade barriers in 1992, Unilever was preparing to undertake a massive re-organisation and rationalisation of its entire food operations across Europe. The need to integrate their European food business meant reducing costs even further with production confined to a limited number of strategically positioned factories nearer to the centre of the European market (23). The result was investment of £30 million in its Grimsby factory - where the company planned to move Kirkby's production.

A company like Unilever makes tactical decisions on a week to week basis - whether to raise or lower output, how to deal with strikes and so on. But strategic decisions - which products to make, where the main production units will be sited and how these plants are to be integrated - are decided years in advance. It appears that Birds Eye, operating under the direction of Unilever, had no intention of introducing Workstyle into the Kirkby plant - given that its closure was imminent. This explains why management, after stewards had themselves requested Workstyle, presented them with conditions which they knew they could not accept. Birds Eye were able to use their rejection as the pretext for the closure decision. No doubt the two new confrontationist plant managers appointed to the Kirkby plant in 1987 were placed there with the pre-conceived purpose of overseeing the closure.

Between the announcement in March and the plant's anticipated closure in September the shop stewards' committee launched a

public campaign aimed at convincing the company to reverse its decision. They set up a community-based Birds Eye Support Group and weekly meetings of up to 40 supporters organised visits to other Birds Eye plants to win blacking of the MenuMaster range of products and a 3,000 strong solidarity demonstration in Kirkby, with delegations from the Gloucester, Lowestoft and Hull plants (24). But the stewards' strategy of resistance to the closure was fatally flawed. To begin with, it was considerably compromised by the 'moderate' ideological stance adopted to media reports of the plant's industrial militancy being the key factor behind the closure. The problem with this 'we are very responsible' approach was that underlying it was a misplaced hope Birds Eye might be forced to change its mind through sheer force of reasoned argument. Secondly, trying to marry a policy of opposition to the closure with such a defensive strategy inevitably became shipwrecked on its own internal contradictions. For example, accepting in principle there would have to be redundancies undermined the stewards' argument that the workforce was 'efficient' and the plant 'viable' and should be kept open. If the factory was 'overmanned' where did you draw the line as to the number of jobs to be lost - the 380 originally sought, all those wanting voluntary redundancy, or the entire workforce as the company demanded?

Thirdly, the stewards' committee chose not to call for a plant wide strike immediately the closure decision was announced. TGWU District Secretary John Farrell warned them against what he called 'stunts which would provoke management'. Yet there is no doubt a strike at Kirkby would have had a cumulative effect on the company and would have been a most effective way of harnessing the latent anger of rank and file members,

mobilising them for the task of winning solidarity action at the other Birds Eye plants aimed at paralysing frozen food production across the country. Joe Carberry explained:

I felt if a strong recommendation to take strike action had been given from day one the outcome could have been different. I always argued that there was only one way to save the factory, that was to have a go ourselves. If that lead had been given it might have changed things. We would have been in a position where we could have made sure nothing moved out of the site and we could have gone round the other sites. But I think we let a lot of people down in the way the fight was actually waged. At the end of the day there was no real will to save the factory.

Not recommending immediate strike action had the effect of dissipating the mood of resistance on the shopfloor, feeding the passivity and reinforcing the view that closure was inevitable. Finally, following the advice of the local TGWU full-time official, the stewards' committee made the mistake of relying on support from the other Birds Eye plants to win the fight for them. Although they repeatedly threatened all-out strike action they were not prepared to act without simultaneous strike action in the other Birds Eye plants. Eventually three months after the closure announcement was made a simultaneous strike ballot was organised in all three plants by the TGWU officials. Kirkby voted 6-1 for strike action - although the apparent high vote masked the fact that many workers who

wanted to take voluntary redundancy agreed to vote in favour of a strike after the stewards agreed to open up negotiations with management over severance terms. The Gloucester and Lowestoft plants voted against strike action by majorities of 200 and 30 respectively. From that moment the campaign against the closure of the Kirkby factory was formally abandoned. Of course, there was some logic to the stewards' strategy. They were acutely aware that unless they got solidarity action at the other Birds Eye plants it was unlikely an all-out strike in Kirkby on its own would force management's hand over the closure decision and they feared jeopardising workers' redundancy payments in a doomed adventurist set-piece battle. But the question arises: unless Kirkby took the initiative in taking strike action themselves, how realistic was it to expect the other plants to act on their behalf? As Billy Caldwell commented:

My reaction as an individual was that I was prepared to have a go. If we couldn't stand up and defend ourselves no one was gonna come along to defend us. So I felt the cart was put before the horse to a certain extent. 'Let's have the ballot first and then we'll all walk at the same time' - that was utopian. We should have gone on strike and then gone to the other plants for their support. We would have been in a much stronger position to make an appeal if we had done it that way round.

No doubt Kirkby's excellent record of solidarity for other workers raised expectations amongst the stewards that instead of

having to take responsibility for fighting the battle themselves they could rely on support from the other plants, as if the Fifth Cavalry would come charging to their defence. Thus, at the end of the day the factory was closed without any effective form of action being taken against the company whatsoever. It was a graphic illustration of how weak the stewards' organisation had become in the preceding years.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO RANK AND FILE MEMBERS: THE 1970s AND 80s

*** the 1970s: forging of the links**

In the 1960s plant-level negotiations with management were conducted virtually exclusively through the single channel of the Convenor, with shop stewards playing very much a subordinate role. The establishment of a negotiating committee shortly after Bobbie Lamb's election ensured there was a more collective leadership style during the 1970s. Even so the position was still central in the plant; partly, because although the senior stewards were involved in key bargaining issues affecting the plant, it was left to the Convenor to conduct most day-to-day negotiations with management; partly, because as the only steward on 100 per cent facility time the Convenor was constantly called upon by stewards to deal with shopfloor grievances; partly, because Bobbie Lamb himself was a charismatic and influential figure. But despite his authoritative position within the factory Bobbie Lamb appears to have lacked the will or the ability to systematically concentrate power into his hands and his dramatic resignation from the Convener's position in late 1976 was a illustration of the constraints he felt imposed on him by the stewards' committee in general and the negotiating committee in particular.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the relationship between Bobbie Lamb and rank and file members was his attitude towards shopfloor stoppages of work. On the one hand, he demonstrated a willingness

to call for militant all-out strike action across the factory on a number of occasions, for example over the guaranteed working week, annual wage negotiations, bonus payments and fixed-term contracts. Invariably, it was the anger of rank and file workers at management's heavy handed approach that created the conditions for such action. But it was Bobbie Lamb who often took the initiative in recommending a strike. Of course, in most cases the strikes were short-lived stoppages. Even so, Bobbie Lamb won overwhelming backing for his appeals on each occasion. The magnificent solidarity shown for the engineer's strike - that subsequently led to a management lock-out - highlighted in sharp relief the significance of Bobbie Lamb's socialist and militant commitment to trade union principles. Joe Carberry related how the Convenor's intervention was critical in galvanising support for the engineers':

The company thought there would be little sympathy amongst TGWU members when the engineers walked out. We immediately called a stewards meeting to discuss what we were going to do about the threat of lay-offs. We met in the training hut - which was right by the main gate. It had big windows in it and people walking past could see the stewards inside. Some of our members started shouting 'We're not going out on strike'. So we were under a little bit of pressure from some our members because they didn't want to become embroiled in another dispute having just been out on the tiles themselves. And some stewards said we shouldn't bother supporting the engineers, as they'd walked past our picket lines when we were out...

The meeting went on for about four hours. But at the end of the day it was Bobbie Lamb's very persuasive arguments about the branch's policy of not crossing picket lines that won the day. So what we told the company was although we would not withdraw our labour in support of the engineers - if they mounted a picket on the gates - then no T and G member would cross it.

It was an extremely difficult decision to have made. The stewards did not have time to organise a mass meeting to put the arguments across and convince the members through open debate. They had to agree on a principled stand in the heat of the moment and then join the engineers' picket line the following morning so as to turn their members away. Bobbie Lamb's authority and respect was undoubtedly the key contributory factor in winning the support of the overwhelming majority of the rank and file, and retaining it throughout the eighteen-week lock-out.

On the other hand, although he was often very sympathetic to rank and file members and stewards involved in departmental disputes he also sought to develop rules governing the rights and duties of shop stewards and their sections. The real dilemma arose whenever sectional strikes threatened lay-offs across the whole plant. An indication of the ambivalent type of response Bobbie Lamb adopted can be seen by considering two incidents that occurred at different periods of time. Firstly, according to shop stewards' committee minutes for 1977 there was a stoppage of work by knock-out men in the freeze and case department - against the advice of their shop steward Frank Doyle - over demands for an increase in job rate. The minutes report:

Bobbie Lamb felt the men had a reasonable claim but was concerned the factory was in serious danger of closing down because of the action. He invited them to meet with the shop stewards' committee to resolve the issue. The men complained they had repeatedly approached their steward for action of some description but none had been forthcoming so they had decided to act by themselves. The men agreed to return to work after the stewards' committee agreed to look into their grievance and report back in a few days time. Bobbie Lamb warned the stewards about unauthorised stoppages of work and the repercussions it could bring. He told them it appeared the freeze and case workers lacked faith in their steward and said stewards should report back to members as much as possible thereby giving satisfaction that their problem was being looked into. They should encourage members to bring their problems to light to discourage wildcat action and they should have the confidence of their members otherwise the stewards ability to negotiate was impaired (25).

Clearly, on this occasion not only was Bobbie Lamb highly sensitive to rank and file workers' sectional grievances but he was also acutely aware of the need for the close accountability of shop stewards to the members. He overcame the problem of the threat of lay-offs by promising to get the issue resolved in favour of the minority on strike whilst convincing them to call off their action. The incident provides a good example of how Bobbie Lamb - as the Convenor of the plant - had to

balance the immediate day-to-day grievances of rank and file members with the desire to provide a long term strategy to protect the interests of the majority of workers across the plant. It is clear his main preoccupation throughout was not only to find a solution that was satisfactory to most concerned but that also led to a strengthening of workplace union organisation at management's expense. This example provides a stark contrast with the attitude adopted by Bobbie Lamb towards workers' sectional militancy in the cold-store department during the early 1970s. Shop stewards' minute books reveal that during one dispute:

Bobbie Lamb acknowledged cold-store departmental managers were being deliberately provocative but warned that walk-outs threatened lay-offs and advised the shop stewards' committee to disassociate themselves from the action (26).

When Birds Eye set up an inquiry into the cold-store it was with Bobbie Lamb's willing approval and participation, despite protests from the cold store stewards. Why did Bobbie Lamb take this negative attitude towards sectional militancy in the cold-store? Joe Carberry offered an explanation:

I think Bob recognised the cold-store lads took things a bit further than they ought to on some occasions. So much so that when Bob said to them 'Let's try and negotiate our way out of this one rather than just walk-out' - even he had a job. There was always a built-in animosity towards that. There was always

a gulf between the cold-store and the rest of the factory and to a certain extent there was an elitist element amongst some of the cold-store workers who didn't think about factory organisation, they only thought about their own parochial aims. ... Once the cold-store stopped everything else shuddered to a halt with people losing their bonus and screaming : 'It's those bolshie bastards in the cold-store again'. Bob felt it wasn't good for the future of the factory to have a massive operation disrupting the factory practically on a weekly basis.

Yet paradoxically it was the strength of the cold-store department that gave the stewards' committee in the plant its overall authority vis-a-vis management. Indeed, sectional strength is the bedrock of any strong shop steward organisation; its success depends upon stewards in each section of a workplace building union organisation through successfully taking up immediate issues and involving the members. This is precisely what appears to have occurred in the cold-store department and their strategic relationship to production greatly assisted their negotiating power.

Of course, although sectional strength is vital, sectionalism - simply being concerned with your own pay and conditions and ignoring everybody else - is a recipe for disaster. Again, this tendency towards parochialism appears to have been evident in the cold-store department but Bobbie Lamb could have made a conscious effort to encourage a generalisation of the self-confidence and organisational strength of the cold-store workers throughout the rest of the factory. That would have

meant involving the cold-store stewards not just in taking a lead on the immediate issues affecting them in their own department but on the wider issues confronting the whole workforce as well. It would have meant arguing with the cold-store workers to link their grievances with those of other sections of workers, taking united action against management (as well as raising broader political issues confronting the workforce). If this had been done it is possible shop stewards from the cold-store could have set the benchmark for those less confident and less well organised in a way that strengthened the power of the stewards generally throughout the factory.

Undoubtedly, such an approach would have been difficult and by no means straightforward. Pushing for industrial action across the plant was something Bobbie Lamb already had difficulties in convincing the senior stewards to support, although if it had been in pursuit of demands that affected workers in every department he might have had greater success. At least such an approach would have had the merit of attempting to accentuate the positive and play down the negative; strengthening the level of shop steward organisation in the factory at management's expense. The alternative approach adopted by Bobbie Lamb was completely self-defeating. Agreeing to participate with the company's inquiry into the cold store conceded the problem lay with the level of shopfloor militancy and workers' organisation rather than with the nature of work and management intransigence. The break-up of what was the best organised department in the factory only served to demoralise and weaken the stewards' organisation across the plant generally. No doubt it encouraged the reluctance of senior stewards to back Bobbie Lamb's subsequent calls for action which in turn

appears eventually to have led to his resignation as Convenor.

Bobbie Lamb's contrasting attitude to the problem of sectional disputes in these two examples, in 1977 and 1972, had their origins in a multitude of factors, including the difference in the regularity of disputes in the two departments and changes in Bobbie Lamb's authority within the stewards' committee. Yet there also appears to have been an underlying ambiguity in Bobbie Lamb's approach to sectional disputes; whilst he saw an important role for workers' struggles it was essentially as an adjunct to his negotiating abilities as Convenor. Nevertheless, the pendulum was pulled much more towards a democratic relationship to the members than under the brief Convenorship of George Knight.

Although there was significant variation from one department to another across the factory there appears to have been a relatively democratic and accountable relationship between the shop stewards and their members during the 1970s, at least until after the lock-out in 1978. At the heart of this dynamic interaction was the general level of confidence and combativity of rank and file workers. Stewards negotiated over job evaluation, bonus payments and condition rates which helped them build up the strength of their section and enhance their prestige in the eyes of their constituents. Not only did they respond to disputes within their own departments but the stewards' committee took the initiative in recommending plant-wide strike action on eight or nine separate occasions during the 1970s, each time receiving the overwhelming backing of the members. Certainly, holding together the union organisation throughout the period of the lock-out and maintaining the backing of the members was a

testimony to the leadership abilities of the stewards' body in the plant.

Paul Chin related:

We had mass meetings with our members every fortnight during the lock-out. There was good contact there and it was part of the reason why we kept together for so long. Some of the T and G stewards used to go to the engineers' mass meetings and boost their morale by speaking in support of the dispute.

Throughout the 1970s every steward worked on the job in day-to-day contact with their constituents. Compared with the 1960s management allowed stewards more lee-way in taking time-off work to deal with their members' grievances, although it depended on the type of job a steward was engaged on and the availability of reliefs. Obviously the senior stewards on the negotiating committee had much greater facility time available to them - particularly for meetings with management - although they do not appear to have taken much time away from their shopfloor job. Formally, stewards were elected every two years in each department. Examination of the minute books for the 1970s reveals that although a small core of about 10-12 stewards remained in office for a number of years there was a constant turnover of the other 15-20 steward positions. Lack of a detailed breakdown makes it difficult to assess how much variation there was between different departments, although one of the cold-store stewards remained in office for over 15 years. Nonetheless, there is little doubt the contesting of stewards' positions at election time was a regular

feature, an indication of the interest in union affairs. Joe Carberry remembered there was a clear difference between the 1970s and the 1980s:

We had more stewards' positions contested in the '70s than we had in the '80s. And more positions were contested in the middle '70s compared with the late '70s. We used to sometimes have two or three candidates for one job. That's because with the factory booming there was a lot more people in the place. So it was quite a healthy situation.

Once established as shop stewards there was little evidence of rank and file members losing confidence sufficiently to demand a new election mid-term, although the fact that it did occur on occasion - for example to Paul Chin in the butchery department - was an illustration of the residual strength of the tradition of direct democracy. There was not a strong tradition of sectional or departmental meetings in the factory; such meetings were only organised by stewards on specific occasions, such as a walk-out of the members. Equally, mass meetings on site were far from common. The main formal channel of democratic accountability between shop stewards and members was the TGWU union branch meeting, held monthly on a Sunday morning, to which the Convenor gave a report back on failures to agree, national pay negotiations, etc. But in the early 1970s the branch was in a pretty moribund state. It was only after an influx of some younger and more political stewards that it turned into a more lively forum for debate and argument about both industrial and political issues, as Joe Carberry explained:

When I started in the factory there was no politics discussed at all in the branch. Only about 20-30 went to meetings. But by 1974-5 some of the older stewards started to drift away and relatively new stewards, like myself, came in. With Bobbie Lamb what we introduced gradually was an element of politics into the branch. We supported the Right to Work Campaign, the Anti-Nazi League and that and the branch started to play a much higher political profile.

Outside speakers were regularly invited to address the meeting; there was the adoption of some basic trade union principles - such as respect for picket lines; and solidarity donations were given to other workers in struggle - such as local strikers at Plessey's, Roneo Vickers and Ford Halewood (27). General resolutions adopted by the branch included opposition to the Corrie anti-abortion bill and the Official Secrets Act (28). By 1977 there were between 50-60 members regularly attending branch meetings - with up to 200 if there was a dispute in the factory. The number of stewards involved also increased from about 9 in 1973 to about 15 in 1977 (29). Dave Worrall, who worked as a fitter's mate in the engineering department at Birds Eye for 33 years and was a member of the branch committee throughout the 1970s and 80s, confirmed there were quite a few women actively involved in the branch, including women shop stewards.

Yet whilst the transformation of the TGWU branch helped to involve more shop stewards and rank and file members in union affairs there was a tendency for the left union activists - who provided much of

its initiative and driving force - to over-emphasise the branch's importance, in the process adopting some rather bureaucratic decisions, for example decreeing that stewards absent from two consecutive branch meetings forfeited their steward's card. Instead of an emphasis on day-to-day political arguments with rank and file members on the shopfloor - for example, taking collection sheets in support of other workers' struggles around - the stewards often looked towards passing resolutions in the trade union branch as the best way to achieve results.

A noticeable feature was the generally low involvement of women in union activities compared with men in the factory. Of course, there were specific reasons for this disparity. Unmarried women did not traditionally expect to be working in the job for more than a few years, and therefore did not under normal conditions show a great deal of interest in union activities. The older married women, who returned to work as their children reached school age, were often impeded from playing a central organising role in the workplace because of the continued responsibility for childcare which forced many of them into part-time work and which limited their ability to go to union branch meetings. Nonetheless, it appears that women workers at Birds Eye came to the fore most when the workforce as a whole was moving forward in struggle. During the 1970s their double oppression acted as a spur driving a number of them to relatively high levels of activism and commitment. In 1968-70 the deputy Convener was a woman, named Sister Kelly (30); when the negotiating committee was set up in 1971 one of its five members was a woman, Sister Malvern (31); the shop stewards' committee had 30 members in 1972 of which 14 were women (32); the branch committee had 16 members in 1974 of which 4 were women (33). But

when the workforce as a whole was in retreat in the period following the lock-out it appears to have had the reverse effect, of being a fetter which prevented them playing a full and effective role in sustaining low level union organisation. Shop stewards' minute books reveal the following information about women activists and the contrast with the period after the lock-out is stark: by 1978 there were only five women shop stewards out of about 30 (34); by 1979 only two women on a branch committee of about fifteen (35) and none on the negotiating committee of five senior stewards (36). Mary Scoggins compared the period of the early 1970s with the period after the lock-out:

I can remember a time when the chicken stripping department and the freeze and case department had some good, strong women stewards who wouldn't take any hassle from the company. They'd stand up and be counted. The factory was larger in the '70s so obviously the ratio of women stewards was higher. But for a number of reasons we lost our good women stewards - some retired, others stayed on but their departments closed down and they didn't become stewards in the new departments they were transferred to. Obviously the lock-out and redundancies cut the workforce and after that there were fewer women prepared to come forward as stewards.

The sexual division of labour and the male dominance of the stewards' committee placed obstacles in the path of the relationship of stewards to rank and file members. Nonetheless, the stewards' committee was

prepared to take up issues directly affecting women workers - such as a day nursery (37), maternity leave (38) and equal pay (39) as well as other more general issues affecting them, such as bonus payments on the racque pie line. Moreover, the active involvement of some women in union affairs and the participation of most women in the relatively high level of disputes in the factory ensured that the divisions did not become an insurmountable handicap, although the lock-out clearly arrested the process.

Arguably, a key limitation of the shop stewards' organisation in the Birds Eye plant during the 1970s, although not sharply exposed at the time, was the lack of an organised and coherent political alternative to 'Labourism' within its ranks. Of course, Bobbie Lamb and the handful of younger, activist shop stewards were not only industrial militants but also held ideas which were to varying degrees distinct from and more radical than those of traditional Labourism. Bobbie Lamb was a left-wing member of the Labour Party whilst the others had a basic socialist, class commitment without any fixed political affiliation - although one or two had been influenced by revolutionary socialist organisations in the past. Paradoxically, despite the fact that these individual trade union activists raised political issues it was usually outside the workplace in the union branch or in the abstract; in effect, there was a separation between their political ideas and their non-political practice on the shopfloor amongst rank and file members. They took this attitude because they believed that overtly political issues went beyond the shop steward committee's bounds inside the factory and that they should limit themselves to the issues of wages and conditions which would unite all workers. If one word had to be used to describe them it would be

'syndicalist' - except this implies they had arrived at a finished ideological position, which was far from being the case. But they did make a division between economics and politics, emphasising industrial struggle to the detriment of political organisation. This did not prevent them from offering a lead to shopfloor struggles and building up the strength of union organisation in the plant during the 1970s. On the contrary, it was often their initiative that pulled the other less militant stewards into action. Nonetheless, their lack of an independent political perspective meant they would find it increasingly difficult to challenge the policy of co-operation with management that was adopted by senior stewards during the recession years of the 1980s.

*** the 1980s: loosening of links**

There was a very different relationship between shop stewards and rank and file members in the Birds Eye plant during the 1980s compared with the 1970s, with the pendulum swinging towards a relatively much more bureaucratic interaction. Firstly, there was the role of the new Convenor. Not only did Joe Barton's 'strong bargaining relationship' with management result in a concentration of decision making in his hands (and those of the deputy Convenor) which effectively reduced the negotiating committee into a rubber-stamp, but it also served to weaken the close links with shopfloor members. Billy Caldwell recalled:

Bobbie Lamb very regularly walked round the factory, visited each department and had a talk with people on the shopfloor to

see if there were any problems. Joe Barton tended to stick very closely to the union office...Bobbie was more prepared to back disputes that started. Whereas one of the things that Joe Barton was most proud of as Convenor was that there'd never been a major stoppage during his tenure of office. That is not a boast you would have ever heard Bobbie Lamb making.

The distinction between 'power for' and 'power over' is useful in comparing Joe Barton with Bobbie Lamb's style of Convenorship. Certainly, the 1980s saw a shift in emphasis. Joe Barton consistently and systematically enforced the procedure against departments like the 3-shift area that wanted to strike, by using the weekly stewards' committee meeting to insist on section stewards' obligations to the wider interests of union organisation. Of course, one of the factors behind Joe Barton's hostile attitude towards departmental stoppages was the general lack of shopfloor confidence to engage in militant struggle compared with the 1970s. In other words, Joe Barton's approach was, in part, rooted in the 'keep your head down' mood that much of the workforce themselves often felt, although it critically depended on whether rank and file members were themselves directly at the receiving end of management attacks as time and again the anger and willingness of sections of workers to fight was dissipated by the Convenor's active intervention. As Paul Chin explained, co-operating with management inevitably backfired on the leading stewards on some occasions as rank and file workers lost confidence in their ability to fight for shopfloor improvements:

By and large, the rest of the stewards committee went along with Joe Barton's philosophy. To my way of thinking they had the mistaken idea that every problem could be solved by negotiation. But a lot of the bargaining we did with the company we came out with the wrong end of it. A lot of people lost faith in the shop stewards committee.

Thus, Joe Barton got away with his 'Don't rock the boat' philosophy, partly because most rank and file workers and stewards were resigned to it most of the time; partly, because disputes tended not to blow up across the whole plant but were isolated pockets of resistance that were easily isolated; partly, because the limited but real concessions granted by management appeared to vindicate the co-operative policy; partly, because amidst a hostile economic world and defeats for sections of the working class movement it appeared to be the only realistic approach; partly, because the militant left stewards in the 3-shift area were marginalised and failed to provide a coherent political alternative. The Convenor's hostile attitude towards departmental stoppages and his co-operative relationship with management helped in the long-term to loosen the close links that had been forged between stewards and rank and file members in the 1970s.

Throughout the 1980s all shop stewards, apart from the Convenor, worked on the job. Freedom of access to members was more restrictive for stewards who worked on the assembly lines in Unit 2 - where the nature of the production system and the tight discipline imposed by management meant stewards were unable to take time-off work unless they

could get somebody to cover for them - compared with the 3-shift area - a 'free working' environment. Formally, the stewards were democratically accountable to their rank and file members but the substantive links cementing the relationship became much weaker during the 1980s. Significantly, the tenure of office of stewards was much longer in the 1980s than in the 1970s, with a majority of stewards remaining in office for over 10 years. Paul Chin, the TGWU branch secretary, reported:

Compared with the '70s there was less change-over and less contesting of positions in the '80s because the automation at Birds Eye, the anti-union legislation and that in the early '80s meant a lot of stewards were reluctant to get involved, because it was a bloody headache. In the '70 you used to have two or three people contesting for the stewards position. People were more confident about being able to get somewhere. But in the '80s although there was a lot of disgruntlement no one wanted the steward's job. Instead, there was apathy. In fact at one time we had to force a competition by introducing a policy into the branch whereby no steward automatically stood for re-election. Some of the stewards thought they were in a sacrosanct position, they'd been in that long.

Brenda Carberry recalled the problem with women shop stewards in the 2-shift area of Unit 2:

The women stewards on my shift were all terribly weak, they really were. They tended to see management's point of view more than male shop stewards and take management's side in a dispute, even with regards to the women. Cathy Brookes was mouth all-mighty but she was a creep. She put the talk on when the boss was around, it was so obvious. Marie Kerrigan did take the bull by the horns a bit and give a little bit of leadership. But she didn't stick out the steward's job long. None of them were shop stewards for long - 12 months to 3 years at the most.

Thus, if there was a lengthy tenure of office amongst male stewards the opposite problem arose amongst the female stewards. Despite the efforts of some of the Left activists it was very difficult to get women to stand and only about five out of thirty stewards were women at any one time during the 1980s. Joe Carberry explained:

There were a few women who when you spoke to them seemed genuinely interested in changing things and fighting the status quo. But you couldn't cajole them to coming forward at the right time, they wouldn't take it as far as getting a steward's card. That was a problem we had all during the '80s. The women stewards were very passive at the stewards' committee, they very rarely got involved in the discussions and debates that went on - compared with the '70s when women were leading some of the debates. Basically, there was a lack of commitment from

the women stewards. Even if you talk about issues you would expect women shop stewards and trade unionists to raise themselves - cancer screening, things of that nature - were never raised by the women. They were raised by the men, the likes of meself, who saw it as an important element of collective bargaining. But we found it very hard to motivate our women stewards to go on courses even and the attendance of women at branch meetings, even female stewards was pretty poor.

But the shop stewards' organisation was handicapped by the lack of active participation of women during the 1980s.

The role of the TGWU branch in shopfloor union organisation also became less significant during the 1980s. Although meetings passed resolutions in support of workers' disputes, including Massey Ferguson in 1980, Liverpool council typists in 1981, the miners in 1984 and Moat House in 1987 (40) the number of stewards and members (including women members) attending declined as Dave Worrall, an active member of the branch for over 20 years, recalled:

The branch only got about 15 people to meetings in the 1980s. About half of them were shop stewards. But it was much less important than it had been. The branch committee went down to 15 and then 12. The company knew we were struggling to get branch meetings off the ground. They knew there was a change of attitude in the steward organisation in general. They sensed the trade union side was beginning to buckle, to get weaker.

Branch meetings effectively became a talking shop where the committed activists could exchange information and debate about union policy but without any vibrant connection with union members on the shopfloor. Despite its limitations during the 1970s the strength of workplace union organisation inside the Birds Eye plant has come from what rank and file workers were prepared to do collectively themselves - given active leadership from the shop stewards. Daily struggles over job evaluation, flexibility and so on, including strikes - both on a departmental and factory-wide basis - were the key to building the power of the stewards' body vis-a-vis management. By contrast, during the 1980s few stewards had experience of organising strikes at departmental level. Negotiating skills developed through 'strong bargaining relations' with management seemed much more important. The result was that in many departments the stewards found it difficult to move their members into activity even when they wanted to - for example in opposition to the closure of the chicken stripping department in 1986.

The overwhelming majority of shop stewards lacked the socialist politics and self-confidence to reject the arguments of management and tended to accept the notion that only increased productivity and profitability could save jobs. They became trapped into accepting the same range of ideas as management and then arguing about the small print. Agreeing with the general concepts of 'viability' and 'efficiency' they were continually browbeaten into abandoning or restraining militant rank and file struggle. Of course, such arguments had been accepted in the 1970s although it had not prevented stewards from being prepared, on occasion, to engage in confrontation with management to win shopfloor gains. The key

difference in the 1980s was that the economic crisis, rising level of unemployment and overhanging threat to close the Birds Eye plant helped strengthen the power of such arguments. The result was that the close links with the rank and file evident during the 1970s - based upon day-to-day struggle - gradually became loosened during the 1980s

Nonetheless, despite the gradual weakening of the relationship between stewards and rank and file members it was still possible for Joe Barton and the stewards' committee to repeatedly make recommendations for one-day factory-wide strikes - albeit, with the backing of union officials and mostly in solidarity with other sections of workers rather than directly for themselves - that received the loyal backing of the workforce. The most vivid illustration of this occurred in 1985 when the Kirkby plant was brought to a standstill in support of the strike-bound Birds Eye plant in Gloucester. The Gloucester strikers - in dispute over the implementation of Workstyle - had informed the Kirkby stewards that four pickets would be sent to seek support. Billy Caldwell reported their reaction:

The reaction of the stewards' committee at first was outright panic. The decision we had to make was basically do we uphold the branch's policy of not crossing picket lines or do we tear it up into little pieces? The stewards' committee was bounced into the decision because from a purely self-respecting point of view, to retain any credibility within themselves, they had no option but to inform the members that when the picket arrived they'd expect them to observe the policy of the branch.

Although there was rumblings against it by sections of the members when it was put to a recommendation it carried the day. They sent four pickets up but they could've sent a dog with a placard round its neck if they'd wanted. No one would have crossed that picket line.

It was a powerful display of solidarity. Significantly, it showed that when the stewards took the initiative and provided a lead, (in this case independently of trade union officials) the rank and file membership was willing to take industrial action. Joe Carberry described the dynamic interaction between rank and file activity and shop steward leadership:

One thing about Kirkby people, and Liverpool people in general, is that although they get whacked about the head by various companies and the media - one of the things you've got to take your hat off to is that they do have a sense of trade union tradition that I would say is unequalled anywhere in this country. When you appeal to their sense of tradition then you get their support. But it was also down to the leadership in the factory, the way the stewards' committee actually got it together and said this is the line we're taking in support of Gloucester and that a strike wouldn't last long before the company backtracked.

Production at the Kirkby plant was brought to a complete halt for two days before the Gloucester dispute was settled when Birds Eye was forced to agree to negotiate - rather than unilaterally impose - new working practices. Yet the willingness of the members to take such action in support of other workers was never encouraged as a way of forcing concessions from management inside the Kirkby plant. Instead, the closure of two major departments in the factory without effective resistance and the deadlocked negotiations over Workstyle gradually had the effect of sapping the morale and confidence of many shopfloor workers. The stewards' acceptance of 350 redundancies as part of Workstyle meant that when the closure of the factory was announced a large proportion of workers had already become resigned to accepting job losses. Although there was still a substantial minority of workers who were genuinely interested in fighting to keep the factory open the stewards' equivocal strategy was doomed to failure. As Jimmy Bennett, a rank and file union member in Unit 2 complained:

The problem with the stewards was that first and foremost they did nothing. They said plenty and they got messages of solidarity to take secondary action if necessary. But what use is that if you're not prepared to take primary action. That's where they lost out. I remember Bryan Lockett coming out with the absurd argument that it would suit management if we downed tools and walked out. At very best all they did was shadow box. They never seriously mounted a campaign of action against the closure - it was purely verbal. Had we taken action and then

called for support you might have had a very different result. It might not have kept the place open, but it could have done. Instead, they basically asked other people to do the battle for us.

Agreeing to redundancies at the same time as mounting opposition to the factory's closure effectively cut the ground from underneath the stewards whole strategy. By playing to the lowest common denominator the stewards reinforced all the hesitations and doubts of the less confident elements of the factory and in turn completely undermined the spirit of those willing to fight. Ultimately, as John Morgan acknowledged, the stewards' weakness was political:

The shop stewards changed from the hard-nosed trade union style of the '70s to a less involved, less political, less committed body of the '80s - obviously, because the environment had changed and people's attitudes had changed.

Even the Left stewards, isolated in the 3-shift area, failed to mount a challenge or pose a coherent political alternative to the stewards' committee strategy. The lack of political organisation inside the plant meant that the type of militant action necessary if Birds Eye were to be forced into keeping the plant open never really became a serious option.

SHOP STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO UNION OFFICIALS: 1970s AND 1980s

*** the 1970s: relative independence**

During the 1970s there were a number of factors encouraging a relatively independent relationship between the Kirkby shop stewards and Birds Eye full-time union officials. Firstly, the size of the workplace meant there was a well-established and sophisticated stewards' organisation able to deal with its own affairs in many respects, as Joe Carberry explained:

If we had a major falling-out with the company, and we had a failure to agree at local level, then we'd call in the local District Officer. But we were not one of those factories that as soon as we had a problem we shouted out for him. Most of the time we looked after ourselves. They used to say it was the easiest plant a District Officer could get because we very rarely wanted him in. It wasn't a question of not trusting the officials. It's just that we felt we could do better without having them in.

Significantly, most of the factory-wide strikes held during the 1970s were initiated by the stewards themselves, sometimes irrespective of the wishes of union officials. Secondly, the nature of the

bargaining system meant there was an important element of plant-based wage determination - over job evaluation, bonus schemes and condition rates - in which stewards were able to substantially increase the take-home pay of their members independently of officials. Annual wage negotiations were conducted by top level corporate Birds Eye managers and national and local full-time TGWU officials through a Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) on behalf of the four Birds Eye plants in Kirkby, Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Eastbourne, and later on in Gloucester. (The Birds Eye plants in Hull and Grimsby had entirely separate national bargaining arrangements with the General and Municipal Workers Union). Only from 1973 - after rank and file pressure, a pragmatic devolving of power within the TGWU and Birds Eye's own reform plans - were the Convenors from each of the four Birds Eye plants allowed to attend JNC meetings, and not until 1984 did the deputy Convenors also become part of the negotiating forum. The problem that confronted the Kirkby stewards was that, despite being the best organised plant in the Birds Eye combine, their bargaining strength over basic rates of pay was tied to the lowest common denominator of the other, weaker plants. Bryan Lockett, deputy Convenor and representative on the JNC during the 1980s, explained the predicament they faced:

We used to do quite well locally in job evaluation and that. When it came to national level we didn't. We were always sold out by the other sites. Every year we rejected the wage offer but to a certain extent the national officers' hands were tied because Lowestoft and Yarmouth would accept less than we were prepared to accept and would defeat us if it went to a ballot.

Because the other sites were not prepared to take any action we had to accept it in the end. All the other plants were badly organised. They had a lot of seasonal and part-time labour, without good union organisation.

Only on one occasion in 1974, did the Kirkby stewards organise plant-wide industrial action over national wage rates - a one-hour demonstration stoppage that was tied to a local protest over canteen price increases (41). Even though they often felt aggrieved at the poor national awards they tended to concentrate their attention on bolstering pay packets independently of the officials through the element of local pay bargaining available to them. In this way they skirted around the problem of wage restraint under the period of the Labour government's 'Social Contract' by negotiating local productivity deals. A third factor promoting the stewards' independent stance was the relatively high level of disputes inside the Kirkby plant, which encouraged a reliance on local strength. Finally, from the mid-1970s onwards the Merseyside Region of the TGWU became one of the most left-wing in the country, with the local full-time official from 1974 onwards, Eddie Roberts, being a former militant Convenor from the Ford Halewood plant. Not only does there appear to have been a friendly personal link between Bobbie Lamb and Eddie Roberts but the latter seemed quite prepared to allow the stewards to act autonomously in many respects, as Joe Carberry related:

Eddie was very much looked upon as one of us, as one of the Left. Eddie's role was basically to get involved in wage

negotiations. We very rarely had him into the factory unless we had a failure to agree over someone getting sacked or something. But he didn't take part in any local negotiations in the plant really.

Of course, the stewards' body was by no means completely autonomous from official trade union structures. For example, Joe Carberry was the TGWU branch delegate to the union's Merseyside District Committee and the union's national trade group for the food, drink and tobacco sector and, following the election of the Labour government in 1974, most stewards in the plant also went on both TUC and TGWU day release or weekend educational courses. It was through such involvement that the stewards' committee was kept informed of industrial and corporate developments and union policies, as well as providing channels through which they could express their own demands, thereby reinforcing an identification with the union on a more official basis than the ad-hoc manner than had previously existed.

But it also meant the stewards' committee came under varying levels of pressure from regional and national officials to keep plant grievances in procedure and avoid plant-wide disputes; official TGWU support for the Labour government's 'Social Contract' tri-partite co-operation between employers, government and union officials appears to have underlain some of the senior stewards' opposition to Bobbie Lamb's style of leadership. On some occasions, national officials were able to exercise a decisively negative role, as for example in 1976, in the wake of the resignation of the negotiating committee, when national officer Bert Ray

unilaterally signed an (appalling) redundancy agreement over the heads of the Kirkby stewards. It was a foretaste of the type of bureaucratic approach the stewards increasingly had to endure, even after Bobbie Lamb's return as Convenor. For example, in 1977 Birds Eye announced its 'Five Year Plan' - aimed at centralising products and moving various kits from one site to another across the country - which posed a major threat to the Kirkby plant faced with the transfer of its steak-lit and beefburger range of products with little being exchanged in return. Joe Carberry described the stewards' strategy:

We fought very hard against the Five Year Plan because we felt that some of the products they wanted to take from Kirkby were the mainstay of the factory. What the company was doing was getting a bone and throwing it in the middle and saying 'go on dogs, fight over it'...We tried to get meetings with stewards at the other four Birds Eye factories to discuss centralisation. We wanted them to adopt a very broad policy which said 'we don't accept your work being transferred and you don't accept ours'. In other words, what we've got we hold. As part of our strategy we tried to form a national stewards' combine committee.

Unfortunately, the combine committee never got off the ground, partly due the unwillingness of TGWU national officials to back the Kirkby stewards' initiative:

There'd been attempts in the past to get the stewards together across the sites to form a national combine but the other stewards' committees weren't as highly organised as we were at the time and we just couldn't get the commitment from the other sites. So we appealed to the T and G to help us set up a combine committee and fund it on a quarterly basis. But the national officer said no, the union couldn't afford it. We were left trying to fund it ourselves but when it came down to it the other branches weren't prepared to help set it up.

Not surprisingly, without a national combine committee the Kirkby stewards' campaign to win the other sites to a strategy of resistance to Birds Eye's product transfers was considerably hamstrung and ultimately unsuccessful. Yet, the constraints of national union officialdom did not prevent the stewards from mounting a four-week unofficial plant-wide strike in 1977 over bonus payments - involving secondary picketing of the Lowestoft plant - or organising the magnificent gesture of solidarity with striking engineers that followed - convincing their members not to cross AUEW picket lines. Yet, after management's lock-out of the workforce, the officials were eventually able to force a return to work on the company's draconian terms and conditions, although the local TGWU official was completely solid behind the stewards' defiant stance, as Joe Carberry related:

Eddie Roberts used to attend every meeting of the Joint Liaison Committee [the TGWU and AUEW stewards' body set up to co-

ordinate the strike]. He was under a hell of a lot of pressure that was bearing down on him from London, from the national officers and the general secretary of the union to get the dispute settled. What he told them was 'Look, every time we try to settle it they move the goalposts again'. He played a leading role with us in that dispute. There is one thing I would never fault about Eddie and that was his commitment to the joint shop stewards' committee throughout that eighteen week dispute.

According to Paul Chin the same could not be said about the TGWU regional and national officials:

Once the company threatened the closure of the site the T and G panicked nationally - because you were talking about a booming factory losing 1,000 jobs down the road. What started to happen then was the control of the dispute started to drift away from the Joint Liaison Committee and the national full-time officials of both the T and G and the AUEW started to get more and more involved in the dispute. They had clandestine meetings with the company in London with no lay representation allowed. Dick Palmer, the T and G Divisional Organiser, was ordered by the national official Bert Ray and the general secretary of the T and G to attend the next meeting of the Joint Liaison Committee and spell out to the AUEW that if they didn't terminate the dispute forthwith then he would be ordering our members to go

back to work. Give him his due - Palmer actually told us what he had been told to say. But he was told in no uncertain terms by the T and G stewards that we would be sticking to our policies and that no union official would order us back to work. We told him we would go back only when the dispute was properly concluded.

Nonetheless, the Kirkby stewards were not able to hold out indefinitely against the pressure bearing down on them from the officials. Joe Carberry related:

The national officers in the eighteen-week dispute never once came to Kirkby. There was a lot of criticism of them for not actively participating. They wouldn't even come up to talk to us. The major input they had into the dispute was bringing it to a close. The company demanded - before a re-opening of the site - total and unconditional surrender and that was an agreement the national officers of all unions reached with the company. It was put to the members with no options whatsoever. If you didn't go back to work then the place would remain shut. So people had no alternative but to terminate the dispute and return to work. The stewards recommended rejection but we were overturned because people were worried about their jobs.

The stewards' organisation suffered a severe set-back in the aftermath of the lock-out, although it recovered sufficient strength by

1979 to defy national officials and threaten a factory-wide overtime ban, which successfully forced management to discontinue employment of workers on fixed short-term contracts.

*** the 1980s: relative dependence**

If during the 1970s the stewards' organisation had a relatively high degree of self-reliance and initiative vis-a-vis full-time union officials by the 1980s a number of factors pushed the pendulum towards a much more dependent relationship. To begin with, the introduction of measured day work in 1978 ended the element of local pay determination that existed inside the Kirkby plant and made the stewards much more reliant on pay rates negotiated at national level by TGWU officers and corporate Birds Eye management. Even though annual pay increases were consistently poor and sometimes below the rate of inflation the stewards did not feel strong enough to take action either to put pressure on the officials or bolster their hand at the negotiating table, at least independently of a lead from the officials themselves. Although the national officials preferred to secure a 'satisfactory' settlement through negotiation from above rather than encouraging militant action from below they felt compelled on some occasions during the early 1980s, when they found their bargaining role being completely undermined by Birds Eye corporate managers, to threaten, and even organise, industrial action within the plants .

For example, in 1981 when Birds Eye adopted a belligerent attitude and refused to improve its 9 per cent pay offer, negotiations

completely broke down after the company - referring to TGWU full-time officers as 'messenger boys' - provoked a walk out by the union's negotiators. (42) National officials responded by calling for a one-day strike at their four Birds Eye factories unless the company improved its offer, which the Kirkby stewards' committee voted to support. But the Day of Action was called off when the company made a slight concession in the pay package, sufficient for the national officials to recommend acceptance of the offer to the membership. The Kirkby stewards' minutes report there 'was a great deal of criticism' of the company-union deal, although it was eventually approved by a slim majority. Again in 1982, when Birds Eye refused point-blank to improve its (pathetic) 7 per cent wage offer, TGWU national officials felt unable to accept such a deal without at least a show of disapproval, although they preferred limited token action. They called for a 24-hour strike across all the Birds Eye plants to be followed at a later date by an indefinite strike unless the company improved its offer. On this occasion the 24 hour strike went ahead and the Kirkby plant participated. Nonetheless, the TGWU officials' apparent change of approach was short-lived and did not alter their basic bureaucratic behaviour. Using the equivocation of General and Municipal Workers Union officials - who insisted on a two-thirds majority ballot vote in favour of strike action in the Humberside plants - they called off the all-out strike even though a head count of all the factories had recorded a 2-1 majority against the company's offer. (43) They then put the company's unchanged offer to a vote of the membership without recommending acceptance or rejection. Although the Kirkby stewards' committee and membership voted against the deal it was accepted by a majority across the other plants. Once more in 1984, the

national officials were pushed into calling a 24-hour strike following Birds Eye's closure of the Great Yarmouth plant and the transfer of some labour to its Lowestoft site without an adequate redundancy agreement. (44) Again, Kirkby joined the stoppage. Otherwise the TUC's 'new realism' pervaded national negotiations and although the Kirkby stewards often voted against pay deals they applied no direct pressure themselves and took no independent initiatives.

Meanwhile, even though the stewards' committee organised a number of one-day factory-wide solidarity stoppages during the 1980s the action was almost always only taken after being initiated, sanctioned and formally proposed at mass meetings by full-time union officials in line with TUC or TGWU policy - for example, the TUC Day of Action against the Tories anti-union legislation in 1980 (45), the TUC Day of Action in support of NHS workers in 1982 (46), and the Merseyside TGWU Region's support for Liverpool City Council in 1985 (47). The only exception to this was the two-day unofficial strike in support of the Birds Eye Gloucester plant in 1985, when the Kirkby stewards recommended their members respected workers' pickets lines, but whilst agreeing to the action at the time Joe Barton immediately set about afterwards ensuring the Kirkby plant would not be placed in the same situation again. (48) A national meeting of Convenors from all Birds Eye factories agreed to his policy statement that in future: 'Before any pickets can be placed on the gates of another plant, the action has to be sanctioned by the national officers or by a full recall of the national negotiating committee'. (49)

The full extent of the stewards dependence on full-time officials became evident during the campaign against Workstyle and the

closure of the Kirkby plant. In 1987 a new local TGWU official, John Farrell, was instrumental in helping to establish a Birds Eye national shop stewards' combine committee. Paul Chin related:

The impetus for that to be set up was obviously the change in the company's strategy for the '90s. They had decided that Workstyle was coming in across the country. The real driving force behind the combine committee, it's got to be said, was John Farrell. Bobbie Lamb had tried to get a committee off the ground but didn't get the backing. Farrell provided us with the extra impetus. He was the architect of the committee. He phoned round the officers and got it off the ground.

The stewards' combine committee linked the Kirkby, Hull, Gloucester and Lowestoft Birds Eye plants. It held a number of joint meetings and adopted a formal declaration that each site would take solidarity action if any plant was faced with enforced redundancies. But John Farrell's influence on the Kirkby stewards' resistance to Workstyle was all-pervading; it was on his advice the stewards agreed to the company's demand for 380 redundancies, albeit on a voluntary basis and if severance terms were improved. It was probably this strategy which more than anything else undermined the possibility of a fight back when the factory's closure was announced.

Billy Caldwell explained how the local official tried to forge a united front between those wanting to keep their jobs with those wanting to take the redundancy money:

It was all John Farrell's strategy. His argument at mass meetings was to say 'We've always accepted there'd have to be redundancies but if you do want to go - the only way to get better money and help yourself is to get behind those who are fighting for their jobs.' What he did was always hammer home that he was capable of a getting a good few bob for redundancy payments. He'd say 'those of you who want out - I can get you a good deal'. He'd quote figures and of course the pound signs would be flashing in front of their eyes, ye know. All right, at the end of the day, certainly if people have to go I agree they shouldn't be sent out of the gate with nothing but he shouldn't have been stressing that at the expense of the people who wanted their jobs.

The stewards' decision to tie any possible strike action in Kirkby to simultaneous action in two other Birds Eye plants was very much Farrell's brainchild, backed by TGWU national officer, Brian Revell. Yet inevitably, the whole strategy backfired when a large section of the membership succeeded in pressurising the stewards' committee to open up negotiations with the company over improved severance terms at the same time as they were organising a strike ballot against the closure.

Although formally Kirkby voted in favour of strike action the vast majority of the workforce had by then accepted redundancy as a fait accompli. Ironically, when the Gloucester and Lowestoft plants voted against supporting Kirkby it provided John Farrell with a convenient fall-

guy for the collapse of the campaign. Billy Caldwell was highly critical of the influential role played by the local union official:

When Workstyle was first mentioned it was negotiable and should have been dealt with by the negotiating committee. Alright, involve the full-time official in an advisory capacity, certainly keep him informed of what's going on, invite him to meetings. But keep control of it, because you're part of the factory, he isn't. He's not involved to the same extent as we are and it's your property. But what ultimately happened is that it was Farrell who was basically running it at the end of the day. The negotiating committee became more or less a syphon. There is a lesson to be learnt there, it was an over involvement of the full-time official.

Even though individual members of the stewards' committee argued for immediate strike action when the factory's closure was announced, there was no serious attempt to challenge or campaign against the dominant strategy adopted by John Farrell and the negotiating committee. In effect, if the Kirkby workforce were encouraged to look to the other Birds Eye plants like the Fifth Cavalry coming to their support, the negotiating committee tended to look upwards to the local full-time official to pull something out of the bag. Their dependence on John Farrell and national officials meant they were led into what proved to be a fatally flawed campaign of opposition and to eventual acceptance of the factory's closure, without any effective action being taken whatsoever.

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CHAPTER THREE: BEMROSE

INTERVIEWEES :

Stan Livingston: NGA process chapel FoC, chairman of Federated Chapel.

Bob Henderson: NGA machine chapel FoC.

Jimmy Wilson: SOGAT chapel FoC, president of Merseyside SOGAT branch.

Barry Caton: SOGAT committee member in machine room, secretary of
Federated Chapel.

Steve Hewes: SOGAT committee member in finishing department.

Cathy Kewley: SOGAT rank and file member in finishing department.

Tommy Brown: SOGAT rank and file member in machine room.

Frank O'Donoghue: SOGAT committee member in finishing department,
secretary of Federated Chapel.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS

1969: 3-week SOGAT strike.

1970:

1971:

1972: Formation of Federated Chapel linking all unions except SLADE.

Reduction of 151 different wage rates to 14.

Bruce Matthews appointed chairman of Bemrose.

1973:

1974: Extra 4 editions of 'TV Times' awarded, making 13 editions in total.

1975:

1976:

1977: SLADE dispute over morning shift pay.

4 night week granted.

FoC's granted 100 per cent facility time off work.

1978:

1979: National TV electricians' strike halts production of 'TV Times'.

1980: Joint Federated Chapel (including SLADE) established.

1981: Loss of 'TV Times' magazine.

Robert Maxwell takes over company briefly.

'SunDay' magazine taken on.

Survival Plan introduced.

1982: SLADE and NGA merge to become NGA '82.

NGA machine chapel dispute leads to formation of Joint Working Party;
parity talks begin with aim of equalising craft wage rates.

1983: NGA Warrington dispute/mass picketing.

100 people taken on in NGA machine and SOGAT chapels.

First year's reduction of craft differential.

1984: National miners' strike.

1985: Jimmy Wilson has SOGAT union card withdrawn.

1986: Final year of equalisation of pay rates - 2 basic craft and 2 new
non-craft rates.

Strikers from News International's Wapping plant picket Bemrose.

Jimmy Wilson expelled from SOGAT.

1987: Loss of 'Sunday Express'.

775 redundancies reduces the workforce to 567.

Jimmy Wilson forced to resign as SOGAT FoC

100 per cent facility time off work withdrawn from FoC's.

SOGAT dispute in machine room

1988: Redundant workers sue company for unfair dismissal.

House Agreements temporarily terminated by company

1989:

1990: Loss of 'SunDay' magazine.

413 redundancies reduces workforce to 160.

1991: Factory closed.

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INTRODUCTION

The Eric Bemrose printing plant was established on its single Liverpool site in 1939 as an independent family company, until control gradually passed to the News of the World Organisation in the late 1960s, which in turn was itself taken over by the British arm of Rupert Murdoch's global media empire, News International. Murdoch's British interests include national newspapers ('The Sun', 'News of the World', 'The Times', 'Sunday Times', 'Financial Times' and 'Today'), magazines ('New Woman'), provincial papers (8 dailies and 69 weeklies), books (William Collins, Longman and Penguin) and television (Yorkshire TV, British Sky Television). Murdoch's News Corporation also has extensive world wide interests in media corporations, particularly in Australia and the United States (including 20th Century Fox and national television networks) and reported profits of £101.7 million in 1991 (1).

Situated close to the famous Grand National course in Aintree, Eric Bemrose was, until its closure in 1991, one of the three major photo-gravure colour printing plants in Britain specialising in long run, fast speed and high quality printing. During the 1950s and 60s they printed mainly children's comics such as 'Eagle', 'Swift', 'Robin' and 'Girl', plus other periodicals such as 'Arcade', 'Autocar' and 'Practical Motorist'; in the 1970s the main print run was all 13 editions of the TV Times magazine; and in the 1980s it was the 'Sunday Express', 'Sunday

Telegraph' and 'News of the World' colour supplements and a number of 're-winds', the colour pages pre-printed and later re-wound into many national newspapers (including the 'Daily Mail' and 'Daily Express').

The key feature of photo-gravure work is that the printing surface is a copper cylinder treated in such a way that the printing areas are lower than their surroundings. Ink flows into these areas and is drawn onto the paper as it passes over the revolving cylinder on the printing machine. Because of the high cost of preparing the printing cylinder the process is generally only economic for very long runs, and is particularly suitable for the production of large circulation periodicals. Throughout the 1970s there were four quite separate stages of production in Bemrose, each with their own department. This was reduced to three in the 1980s. Firstly, there used to be the composing department, where the original text was set in lead type and made up into page form. By the early 1980s this department had been closed down and its typesetting method replaced by computerised photocomposition. Secondly, the process department, where illustrative material such as photographs and diagrams (and from 1981 typeset artwork brought in from outside) was converted into a form suitable for printing by the production of negatives and the actual printing surface on the copper cylinders; this department was made up of ten different sections (including carbon printing, proofing and planning) until 1981 when it was reduced to five. Thirdly the machine room, where the cylinders were fitted to the nine printing presses and where the inked printing surface and paper were brought into contact. Fourthly the finishing department, where the edges of printed work were trimmed,

separate printed sections collated into single volumes and the finished product gathered into bundles of a specified size ready for dispatch.

Developments in the highly sophisticated technology of gravure printing at Bemrose were generally in the form of small modifications or improvements, such as in the process department (concerned with the production of artwork and the actual printing surface) and in the finishing department where various forms of mechanisation were introduced. Yet throughout the 1970s and 80s, much to the dismay of the unions, there was no major new investment in plant or machinery despite the rapidly advancing technology in colour magazine and newspaper production, in particular web offset printing. For most of the 1970s and early 1980s the factory employed about 1400 manual production workers, including 170 compositors, 350 process workers, 170 machine minders and 640 non-craft assistants. All but about 100 of these were male; most female workers were employed in the finishing department. The bulk of the workforce were concentrated in the process department (about 325), the machine room (about 430) and the finishing department (about 225). In 1981 90 compositors lost their jobs. But much more severe redundancy exercises took place in 1987 when 700 workers, over half of the workforce, were sacked (leaving only about 550 workers) and in 1990 when there were 413 redundancies (leaving only about 160 workers) before the plant was finally closed completely in 1991. The hours of work were as follows: in the process department a 2-shift system, Monday-Thursday 7am-3pm, 3pm-11pm and Friday 7am-6pm; in the machine room and finishing department a 3-shift system, 7am-3pm, 3pm-11pm and 11pm-7am.

The three major production trade unions during the 1970s were the National Graphical Association (NGA), the Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers, Engravers and Process Workers (SLADE) and the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades (SOGAT). In 1982 an amalgamation at national level of SLADE and the NGA led to the formation of one trade union, known as NGA '82, leaving two production unions in Bemrose, one craft and one non-craft (the amalgamation of the NGA and SOGAT in 1991 led to what is now known as the Graphical, Paper and Media Union). In common with most large printing plants a 'closed shop' policy operated at Bemrose for most of the 1970s and 80s, with even departmental managers and foremen belonging to the same union as shopfloor workers. Union members were organised into 'chapels' of the union within the plant. Thus, until 1982, all members of SLADE were members of the same chapel, while there were two separate NGA chapels and one SOGAT chapel. The distribution of union members in the plant into four separate chapels during the 1970s was related to the four stages of production outlined above. SLADE was involved at the first stage of production, that is with the preparation of the cylindrical gravure printing surface. The NGA was involved at two stages of production; a proportion of their members were in the composing department, setting the text material while the majority were in the machine room, in charge of the printing machines. SOGAT members were to be found in many parts of the factory, for example transporting the copper cylinders between departments. Their greatest strength however lay in the two departments where they acted as assistants to the skilled craftsmen, namely in the machine room and in the finishing department, and on the loading bay where the finished product was dispatched.

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Two major changes to these chapel arrangements occurred in the 1980s. Following the closure of the composing department in 1981 the NGA chapel in that area disappeared; and following the amalgamation of SLADE with the NGA in 1982 the old SLADE process chapel became known as the NGA '82 chapel. Thus, to recap: in the 1970s there were four major separate union chapels in Bemrose, the SLADE process chapel, the NGA composing chapel, the NGA machine chapel and the SOGAT chapel. During the 1980s there were only three major chapels, the NGA '82 process chapel, the NGA machine chapel and the SOGAT chapel (although the EETPU, AUEW, etc also had their own small chapels). .

Each chapel elected a shop stewards' Convenor, known as the 'father of the chapel' (FoC) together with a deputy FoC (DFoC), a treasurer and a committee of shop stewards, known as 'committee reps' to act on its behalf in administering the chapel's affairs and to negotiate with management. The FoC, DFoC and treasurer were elected annually by the chapel membership in a secret ballot and the reps - representing the different shifts in each department - were elected to serve for a period of two years, with half of them up for re-election each year. The chapel committee usually met monthly and meetings of the full chapel membership were held every quarter (one of which was the Annual General Meeting). All major negotiations with management were entrusted to the FoC, DFoC and chapel secretary (who was elected from within the committee).

Although reference is sometimes made to the national agreements between the combined printing trade unions and the British Printing Industries Federation (BPIF) Bemrose always had its own 'House Agreement', generally running for one year and determined exclusively at

plant level. Until 1972 each chapel negotiated its own separate House Agreement, which specified such matters as basic rates of pay, shift premia, holiday levels, manning arrangements, etc. The formation of a Federated House Chapel considerably reduced this fragmentation by bringing together all the unions in the plant except the SLADE process chapel. It was composed of the FoC of each chapel plus one other representative, usually the DFoC, and although it met only infrequently, conducted all major plant wide negotiations leading to a 'Joint House Agreement'. The SLADE process chapel continued to negotiate its own separate House Agreement - fearing a joint body would jeopardise its relatively highly advantageous position - until it finally agreed to join the Federated Chapel in 1981.

Each Bemrose chapel was part of a wider trade union organisation, namely a union branch structure that linked a number of workplace chapels throughout the region. Thus, in the 1970s both the NGA composers and NGA machine chapels were represented by the Liverpool NGA branch, the SLADE process chapel by the Liverpool SLADE branch and the SOGAT chapel by the Merseyside SOGAT branch. Since the early 1980s only two union branches had representation, after the old SLADE process chapel transferred its membership into the NGA branch and replaced the disbanded NGA composing chapel. The branches usually met quarterly, with compulsory attendance from chapel delegates co-ordinated on a rota basis; they elected a branch committee by a ballot of the members throughout the region. Full-time union branch officials (and national officers) were involved in negotiations with Bemrose and News International management and were

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responsible for ratifying all House Agreements signed by chapels to ensure they were consistent with the union's national policy.

Time off work for union business and shopfloor negotiation was granted by management to the chapels in the early 1970s although committee reps, including the FoC, spent most of their day working on the job. This arrangement changed in 1976-7 when management granted full-time facility status to each of the four major chapel FoC's and allowed much greater time-off work for DFOC's. In addition, they provided the four chapels with small union offices on the shopfloor. Only after the major redundancy exercise that occurred ten years later in 1987, did management decide to suddenly withdraw these facilities, forcing all FoC's back onto the job again.

Most of my case study material was gathered from a number of in-depth interviews with a selection of key trade union informants from the various workplace chapels at Bemrose (including different chapel FoC's, committee reps and rank and file union members). I also had access to minute books of the SLADE and NGA '82 process chapel, to House Agreements of both SLADE and the Federated Chapel and a variety of union, Federated Chapel and company documents. Unfortunately, repeated requests to interview industrial relations managers at Bemrose were turned down; it seems that although the plant management were happy enough to assist my research News International were not, and the parent company's disposition prevailed. Despite these obstacles I have attempted, so far as has been possible, to reconstruct the rationale behind management's strategy towards shop stewards' organisation.

Because of the complexity of the trade union organisation I decided to concentrate particular attention on the SOGAT chapel committee. On the one hand, any understanding of shopfloor industrial relations in Bemrose is obliged to consider all the major separate chapels; this is something I have attempted to do, particularly in terms of their relationship to management (excluding the NGA composing chapel which was disbanded in the early 1980s). On the other hand, I also found it useful to narrow the focus of my inquiry so as to provide the necessary flesh to the bones of an account of chapel committee organisation. My choice of the SOGAT chapel was taken for a variety of reasons. Firstly, SOGAT always organised the largest number of workers in the plant. Prior to the 1987 redundancy exercise SOGAT had over 700 members compared with the NGA '82 process chapel's 225 and the NGA '82 machine chapel's 185. Secondly, the SOGAT chapel, unlike any other, had members in every department of the factory, providing it with an invaluable overview of developments across the plant as a whole. Thirdly, in the course of my research I found within the SOGAT chapel a wider pool of experienced union activists, both able and willing to be interviewed, than existed in other chapels. Fourthly, I discovered that developments inside the plant had a dramatic impact on the SOGAT chapel committee which provided insights into the underlying processes at work generally, which served to validate my choice of focus. Finally, unlike the other chapels, SOGAT organised the non-craft and unskilled workers and was most akin to the shopfloor production workers that I have examined in the two other case studies.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1970s

*** the 1970s: the stewards' strengths**

The 1970s unquestionably represented the heyday of shopfloor union power inside the Bemrose plant as a number of objective and structural factors, combined with a subjective and conscious attempt to build workplace union organisation, enabled the respective chapel committees to wield considerable bargaining leverage. It is possible to distinguish some of the key ingredients at work. To begin with, one of the bedrocks of union organisation exercised by all four chapels and their union branches (craft and non-craft) was their ability to regulate the total supply of labour through rules that governed the ratio of apprentices to time served men (district standards that operated a list of unemployed members from which management had to recruit) and the pre-entry closed shop which ensured only union members were hired. Such control over the supply of labour placed the Bemrose printing chapels in an exclusive position vis-a-vis management.

Stan Livingston, a SLADE chapel member in the carbon printing section of the process department, worked at Bemrose for 33 years; during the 1980s he became the NGA '82 process chapel FoC (after the SLADE/NGA amalgamation) and chairman of the plant's Federated Chapel. He described the consequences of control over the supply of labour for the SLADE process chapel in the early 1970s:

Skilled process workers were in short supply in the North West in the 1950s and 60s and that meant Bemrose had to pay excellent rates of pay to attract people from down south to move to Liverpool. The knock-on effect was that it raised rates generally in Bemrose and in other printing establishments in the Liverpool area. In fact Bemrose became a national leader in gravure wage rates across the whole country. And it gave the unions - with a pre-entry closed shop and the apprenticeship scheme - a lot of control. They were able to say to management 'How many do you want? Four? No, you're getting four, plus two apprentices'. By the late '60s and early '70s the number of people in the process department grew from something like 150 to 400.

Similarly, the non-craft SOGAT chapel was able to restrict and control the supply of labour through its union branch's effective role as a labour exchange. As Tommy Brown, a rank and file SOGAT member who worked for 16 years in the machine room, remembered: 'People used to say 'What, get a job in Bemrose? You've got to get a letter off the Pope to get in that place'.

A second factor placing the chapel committees in a strong bargaining position was the state of the product market, notably Bemrose's heavy reliance upon the production of such ephemeral items as weekly periodicals. During the 1960s and 70s the factory's production output boomed as an endless variety of new magazine titles were taken on. Naturally, it was of the utmost importance to the publishers of the

magazines that their periodicals were on sale on the usual day of publication, although as they wanted to be as topical as possible the original editorial material would be sent as late as possible. This meant that most printing was done to very tight schedules. Yet the often huge print runs made this a precarious business. Moreover, by the late 1960s the 'TV Times' contract increasingly took on immense importance. At 7 million copies a week it was the largest circulation magazine in Western Europe. By 1974 all 13 separate regional editions were printed at Bemrose; with each individual copy being composed of two integrated sections it made a total print run of some 14 million. In these circumstances, management found themselves in an extremely vulnerable position since often resistance to a union claim appeared to make little short-term financial sense compared with the consequences of disrupted production and loss of revenue and advertisers' confidence. As Stan Livingston observed:

Management's strategy was to get the bloody job out, keep the thing moving, ye know. We were printing weekly publications, millions of copies, and any hiccup along the line could seriously effect production. When we printed the 'TV Times' it was dated work. So if the work didn't leave the factory on a Thursday morning it wasn't going to be in the shops on time. Obviously, we took full advantage of that situation to gain some of the concessions over the years. That was the situation management had to contend with all the time. Oh yeah, Bemrose was strange, it was something else. Sometimes we'd walk out of

negotiations and think 'how the hell did we get away with that'. Basically, we had them by the bollocks in those days.

But it was not just objective factors that accounted for why the balance of bargaining power was tilted in favour of union organisation during the 1970s. There was also the subjective element, the high degree of conscious intervention involved in building up the strength of the chapel committees. Each of the four chapels had highly efficient administrative arrangements and an authoritative committee structure that monitored all day-to-day working practices, drawing up both the overtime and holiday rotas and allocating them to their members on the basis of seniority, thereby taking away from management the ability to choose people on a 'blue-eyed' system. As Tommy Brown recalled:

If a manager had four machines running on a Saturday he would go to his committee man and tell him he needed so many people. And the committee man would get the names of the individuals from the rotas to do the overtime, whether the management liked them or not. The committee determined who worked, when they worked and the number of hours they worked.

The SOGAT chapel committee also established powerful control over manning arrangements: mobility of labour between and within departments was severely circumscribed, demarcation strictly adhered to and staffings on machines rigorously enforced. Such control did not materialise out of thin air; it was directly related to the left-wing political

involvement of some of the key committee activists. Jimmy Wilson worked at Bemrose for 30 years; elected as the SOGAT FoC in 1971 he remained in office for 17 years (serving as the Merseyside SOGAT branch president in the late 1970s) until his expulsion from the union in 1987. An active member of the Labour Party and supporter of the hard-left 'Militant' group, Jimmy played a pivotal role in building the strength of chapel committee organisation, particularly in relation to manning.

After I'd become FoC I stopped the mobility of labour, people transferring from one department to another, with the primary aim of increasing the numbers employed. The agreed staffings on the machines were - for use of a better word - policed by the chapel officials. In the machine room there were supposed to be 10 SOGAT members and 5 NGA on each press. Well, from a SOGAT point of view it was obvious you were scratching around some times with nothing to do, but the union had the ultimate number of jobs in mind and the committee would discipline members for being absent from the press, so as to preserve jobs. That was the strength of organisation on the floor.

Tommy Brown also stressed the controls over the job exercised by chapel committee representatives:

The movement of labour was very, very strict. If you were part of a crew on a press in the machine room you couldn't be moved to the finishing. You could move within the department - they

would post you from one job to another - but even then if you worked for a certain period of time on a machine it constituted part of the day and they wouldn't be allowed to move you again on that day. Management always accepted that.

Significantly, there were only a handful of strikes or stoppages of work inside the Bemrose plant during the 1970s. Workers' strategic position meant there was little need to resort to such tactics in order to squeeze concessions from management. Indeed, the SLADE process chapel was never involved in a strike by their members; their only major dispute was in 1977 when they organised their members on the afternoon and night shifts to join their colleagues on the morning shift for a week, in a bid to win shift premium for morning shift work. The SOGAT chapel were involved in a 3-week all-out strike of their members in 1969 in a successful protest at management attempts to increase production from 25,000-30,000 copies an hour on the presses in the machine room and a 3-day strike over a similar issue in 1974, as well as a handful of other walk-outs of 2 or 3 days duration in the late 1970s. Generally however, major disputes were few and far between. Bob Henderson, who worked in the machine room from 1973, with experience as a committee representative and NGA machine chapel FoC in the late 1980s, related:

There was only about nine major stoppages in the last eighteen years and only about two of them involved the NGA. It was mainly SOGAT. You would get sanctions imposed every other year in the machine room by the NGA over the House Agreement. It was

the only way we could make ourselves felt because we were always chasing SLADE. We'd have one-hour, two-hour stoppages. Traditionally, we'd have disputes in the summer, because of the stinking heat in the place, it was like a biscuit tin. But very little disruption took place really.

Various forms of industrial action that fell short of a strike, such as an overtime ban, could still cause disruption and financial damage and were used by chapel committees as a bargaining lever over issues that were matters of principle, such as manning. Jimmy Wilson described how even the threat to delay the dispatch of printed material within the loading bay area of the finishing department was ultimately an extremely potent weapon in the hands of the SOGAT chapel:

It was a cat and mouse situation, guerilla tactics rather than open warfare. The 'TV Times' had delivery clauses, penalty clauses built into them. So the best negotiating tactic was to get all the magazines printed, get them on the loading bay, and then refuse to send them out. It would send the management crazy because they'd paid all the production costs, got it ready for delivery and the only place it could go was to pulp. The manager would know that and he'd cave in.

But such examples of industrial action occurred only occasionally; rarely did any major confrontation between shopfloor workers and management take place. Indeed, only on two occasions was an issue of

the 'TV Times' ever lost through action taken by the chapels. For the vast majority of the time, despite conflicts of interest, chapel committees and plant management were able to find mutually acceptable arrangements and compromises with one another through a process of 'strong bargaining relations'. Nonetheless, as Stan Livingston pointed out, the balance was clearly tilted in favour of the unions:

It would be 60-40 to the unions. Not over everything of course, management didn't lose hands down, on some issues they tried to dig their heels in. But they didn't have it all their own way either. There again, there wasn't any serious conflict. The unions were quite strong and we took advantage of that.

The chairman of Bemrose from 1972 (until 1986) was Bruce Matthews, a key figure in Rupert Murdoch's News International (the parent company). No doubt the proprietor's goals and constraints set the framework for local plant management in Liverpool. Based in London, Matthews conducted all Bemrose's major negotiations, particularly over House Agreements, with the FoC's and other chapel representatives. As Jimmy Wilson commented 'Basically, the plant was run down the end of a telephone from London'. At plant level management bargained separately with each of the four workplace chapels (and full-time officials from three different unions).

The threat of redundancies or factory closure was often used by the company, particularly when the contracts for the 'TV Times' came up for renewal, warning that petty restrictions by the unions were

hampering productivity and competitiveness (2). Barry Caton, a member of the far-left Socialist Workers Party, who worked at Bemrose for 11 years (mainly in the machine room) and served as a SOGAT committee rep and Federated Chapel secretary during the 1970s, related:

Management were always threatening redundancies. They'd say if we lost a contract it will be on your head. Obviously that was always present in people's minds but it was a bit like Peter and the Wolf. They were always wringing their hands and saying the company wasn't making money. In fact, on the books, the company didn't make any profits from 1957-1987 - in accountancy terms they lost money every year. So every time they came to us with their violin stories and sob tales we simply said 'We've heard it all before. We get the same story from you every week'.

Despite the repeated warnings the money somehow seemed to be found, the magazines continued to be printed and the plant stayed open. Indeed, management appeared much more concerned to keep production rolling smoothly with the minimum of disruption by avoiding open confrontation with the chapels. Yet given that, officially at least, the plant was not profitable, it is interesting to speculate as to why Bemrose and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation bothered to continue to keep it open for so many years. Such a question is very difficult to answer definitively, although Jimmy Wilson provided one extremely intriguing assessment:

It took me quite a number of years but I eventually found out why. Obviously we were in receipt of all the balance sheets. We had access to all the information from the company and all the information from Companies House. We employed an actuary to assist us and when we needed them chartered accountants to advise us. What I believe was happening is this. At the time we were printing the largest circulation periodical in the country. Rupert Murdoch and Bruce Matthews (the company chairman) were presented with gold badges by the Finnish government for buying paper from them. I believe that the profit was not in the TV Times magazine, the profit was always in who ordered the paper. It gave Murdoch high quality paper which gave him an advantage when it came to purchasing the 'Sun' and 'News of the World' paper, which he got at the same time probably at considerably reduced prices. Therefore, the profit went directly into the 'Sun' and 'News of the World' rather than going into Eric Bemrose. That is why I believe they ran it and how they ran it.

Of course, such suspicions are impossible to confirm officially, although it might provide some explanation as to why Bemrose management appeared content to allow the chapel committees to exercise such powerful shopfloor control so long as production was maintained at consistently high rates throughout the 1970s.

*** the 1970s: stewards' weaknesses**

Despite the formidable strengths of the chapel committees' organisation inside the Bemrose plant there were also some inherent weaknesses which need to be considered. Whilst sectional strength provided the basis for many gains there is no doubt the chief handicap to workplace union organisation was that of sectionalism within and between the different chapels, unions and departments. Barry Caton explained the antagonism between the craft union NGA and the non-craft union SOGAT in the machine room:

A lot of the problems between the NGA and SOGAT arose because the NGA would always stand on their laurels as being tradesmen, having served their time. I mean, I left school when I was 16 and worked in the printing industry - in Bemrose - ever since, for 17 years. But as far as the NGA are concerned you're still a labourer. They always had the attitude that you're there to brush up and clean around after them and nothing else.

There was a similar craft antagonism in the processing department between SLADE and SOGAT chapel members, as Stan Livingston acknowledged:

Some of the SLADE members were very elitist ye know, very right wing. They looked down on others, at this riff-raff, if you like, the unskilled people in SOGAT. I mean OK, I carry a

briefcase into work - but its full of union stuff. But you would get some SLADE members coming into work with a briefcase with their bloody pyjamas or something in it. Anything to look the businessman type... The pecking order in terms of elitism and craftism was SLADE at the top, the two NGA chapels underneath them and all them looking down on SOGAT.

Craft and union demarcations, rooted in a jealous guarding of control over parts of the production process, were a perennial source of friction between the chapels, as Jimmy Wilson related:

The hatred on the shopfloor was on a daily basis. When you placed a cylinder in a machine it was 2 NGA and 2 SOGAT. The 2 NGA could only hold the bar and if they put the end on SOGAT just walked away. You couldn't hold a bar, they couldn't hold the cup, that's how strict it was. Then in the finishing department if you were webbing a machine up you had to have your correct number up, because if your number wasn't there the NGA would snitch on you and vice versa. Every job was fought for, every job was determined. Hence the mistrust, the conflict came to a head. People could be standing around for a couple of hours arguing whose job it was.

These craft tensions were exacerbated by changes in work organisation, such as modifications to machinery which made some of the traditional operations open to replacement by simpler and quicker

processes. Ironically, some of the most serious disputes in the factory occurred between SOGAT and either the SLADE or NGA chapels, rather than between the chapels (whether individually or collectively) and management (3). Such inter-union rivalry was very damaging to shopfloor union organisation. At one level this can be seen on the issue of wages. Up until 1972 each chapel negotiated its own separate House Agreement (which did not necessarily run for concurrent periods). This fragmented negotiating structure ensured a jungle of competing wage rates and conditions with each chapel grabbing what it could depending on the strength of its bargaining position or abilities of its negotiators. There were 151 different pay grades operating throughout the factory; not only were there, predictably, different rates for craft and non-craft, but some were also based on the different types of machinery one person may have operated from another, such as working with colour as opposed to mono.

Many workers did not know what wages others were getting - even members of the same union - and when the SOGAT chapel took strike action in 1969 management conceded an increase of £2.86p for their members in the machine room but the dispute dragged on for three weeks because both the NGA and SLADE chapels refused to work with SOGAT until management agreed to maintain a 12½ per cent differential between them. Only in 1972 after intense lobbying (mainly by the SOGAT FoC) and delicate negotiation was agreement finally reached to form a Federated House Chapel in Bemrose (effectively a joint shop stewards committee) which succeeded in reducing the number of different pay rates to 14. Jimmy Wilson remembered:

Because of the 1969 SOGAT dispute it was obvious nobody could go it alone. So I set about to organise the other unions collectively rather than going in individually and sniping at one another. I tried to organise a united front, but it was extremely difficult because of the historical factor of the print unions and their distrust of one another. You had to try and rise above that and convince them that as trade unionists the concept, the principle, was the most important thing, not individuals. Obviously, at chapel meetings it was easy to stand up and say 'Fuck the NGA'. But I used to have to convince my own that whether we liked it or not we had to reconcile the position that they were always going to be there. And we did get a Federated Chapel.

Nonetheless, whilst the majority of workplace chapels (including the SOGAT, NGA machine and composing chapels, as well as the smaller maintenance union chapels) became party to a Joint House Agreement between the company and the Federated Chapels organisation, the SLADE process members (later known as the NGA '82 chapel) proceeded to negotiate a separate House Agreement right up until the mid-1980s. The highly specialised skills of SLADE process members encouraged them to guard their highly advantageous position. In 1976 SLADE members earned on average £72 a week compared with £63 for NGA members and £42 for SOGAT members. Following a dispute involving SLADE in 1977 the differential widened even further; by 1980 they earned £26 a week over and above the NGA (4).

Stan Livingston recalled why the SLADE chapel insisted on maintaining a separate bargaining forum:

Management did try to get a joint negotiating forum but the blockage point was the SLADE chapel because we said 'Hang on, no, we've got an exclusive position here, we want to retain it, ye know. We don't want to get involved in the zoo, in the in-fighting'. The other chapels were in a joint negotiating forum, but they spent a lot of their time arguing amongst themselves, holding on to their own autonomies, whereas SLADE's only adversary was the company.

Frank O'Donoghue worked for 28 years in the finishing department, serving as a SOGAT committee representative between 1973-1987 and Federated Chapel secretary between 1984-7. A left wing member of the Labour Party, he emphasised how the 'unwritten law' of differentials between craft and non-craft workers ensured a continuing sectionalism even under the new Federated Chapel umbrella.

The NGA machine chapel had loads of different rates but they used to keep three of their members - the mono hands in the blade shop - on their lowest rate to make sure they kept the differential with SOGAT. We used to encourage the NGA to go in for as much as they could get on the basis that everybody would benefit, if they got more then so would we because we got 87½ per cent of it. But we couldn't get that home to them. To a

certain extent they didn't want to know. They were that busy looking over their shoulder to see what SOGAT were doing they never bothered looking in front of them to see what SLADE were doing. The NGA fella would be on about £12,000 and the SLADE fella would be on about £16,000, but the NGA fella was happy because he was earning more than the SOGAT fella. Those bigots would sooner keep your wages down than see you fighting management.

The autonomy of each union and even individual chapels became a deeply rooted part of print workers' attitudes in Bemrose. It coloured the outlook of even the most socialist of chapel committee representatives, as Jimmy Wilson acknowledged: 'We fell in with the macho image of "our union is better than yours" from time to time without a doubt'. Not suprisingly, management were able to exploit such divisions between the chapels, setting one up against the other, avoiding a situation where all the chapels could present an effective united challenge.

A second factor weakening the strength of the chapel committees' organisation vis-a-vis management was the retention of low level management as members of the craft unions SLADE and the NGA. Whereas in most manufacturing plants shopfloor workers belong to one trade union and supervisors and management to another, in Bemrose as with other printing plants, the situation was much less clear cut. In SLADE, there were 'deputy managers', who supervised the process department in a low level capacity and received 10 per cent better wages. But the NGA had the more ambiguous arrangement, particularly in the machine room, where not

only chargehands (known as 'Number One's') and shift foremen (known as 'whitecoats') but also departmental shift managers were allowed to be members of the union and attend union meetings. Inevitably, they tended to act as a buffer between workers and management. Bob Henderson outlined the ambivalent role of the Number One's:

The problem with the Number One's from a trade union point of view is getting to grips with them. They're left in an island. If the chapel want to kick somebody they kick the Number One. But the Number One's don't want the hassle of slowing down production because they'll have to answer for it. So they'll report the problem to the whitecoat and in turn it goes to the shift manager. But it goes the other way as well. The machine room management will kick the whitecoat, the whitecoat will kick the Number One and the Number One will kick the rest of the workforce. Very often they know they can't win. If they side with the chapel committee management is against them and if they side with management they create a friction on the shopfloor. Its because of that friction we're always kicking our own union. At least SOGAT have a different union to kick when it comes to management.

This contradiction was, in many respects, the NGA machine chapel's Achilles Heel. Barry Caton explained:

In the NGA the well worn route was to do your apprenticeship, do a couple of years on the chapel committee, get elected as a chapel officer, become a 'whitecoat' supervisor and then become a manager and reach the other side. The vast majority of chargehands had been NGA committee men and one of their longer serving FoC's, a fella called Eric Lawrence, was a 'Number One' and went on to be the shift manager in the machine room. In fact, at the same time as he put his name forward to be branch secretary of the NGA branch he put in his application to be a 'white coat'.

Many shopfloor NGA members, forever indebted to Number One's who had protected their particular job niche in the past, continued to display their loyalty and gratitude even after the latter had advanced into the ranks of management. As a consequence, plant managers were able to utilise their network of contacts within the NGA chapel to be kept informed of confidential committee deliberations and decisions. The existence of a transmission belt from the shopfloor upwards to management inside the NGA had a debilitating effect on the strength of the SOGAT chapel committee, as Jimmy Wilson related:

There was no trust between the chapels, we couldn't quite confidently make suggestions of what we were going to do in an open forum because within minutes management were well aware of what we were going to do.

The third weakness of chapel organisation was the contradictory nature of the FoCs' position in relationship to management, in particular the tendencies towards a quasi-managerial role. The House Agreements were relatively highly formalised and meticulously codified documents covering many aspects of working arrangements, including machine running speeds and output anticipated on a daily and weekly basis. Clearly, there were some merits to such formalised House Agreements from a chapel committee's point of view; they committed management to honour jointly negotiated arrangements and made arbitrary or unilateral decision making and changes in working practices much more difficult to justify. Yet they also made it more difficult for chapel committees to evade the burden of responsibility for enforcing the terms of such agreements on their own shopfloor members, ensuring compliance with some onerous conditions. Barry Caton recognised the dilemma:

Rightly or wrongly there tended to be little room for interpretation because the agreement was sacrosanct, enshrined in 'tablets of stone' which both management and union had to honour. You couldn't go to a manager and say 'We're honouring our side - you honour your side of the agreement' if he could prove that patently you weren't honouring your side. Obviously you had to enforce that with your members, you had to police them to an extent.

In effect, the FoC became a key link between the manager and workers in a department, essential to the efficient and smooth running

of the plant. A graphic illustration of this was the monitoring of production figures by the FoCs. In 1976 the Federated Chapel won a 5 per cent pay increase and a four-night week on the night shift, changing what had been an 11pm-5.30am Friday night-Saturday morning shift to a 11pm-3am shift, which made a 32 hour working week (for the night shift). Yet against the background of the Labour government's 5 per cent wage freeze the deal was only conceded on the basis of maintaining production output at its previous level. The deal obliged the FoC's to adopt a new role. Jimmy Wilson recalled what this involved within the SOGAT chapel:

My job as FoC was to uphold our part of the agreement - which necessitated doing the production with the management. In other words, every day I got all the production figures from management and went through them and checked if we were upholding our end of the deal. That was my first job each day, to check the figures for the last 24 hours.

The consequences of such a role were not only that it spurred on members to work faster but it also helped encouraged a positive attitude towards managerial production priorities and methods, a basis for the logic of acquiescence in the face of subsequent product market difficulties.

The final limitation to the power of the chapel committees was evident in the way some shopfloor working practices were clearly double-edged in their effect. For example, the 'blow system' was widespread throughout the chapels, with workers operating for two hours on

the job and then taking two hours off during the shift. Frank O'Donoghue recalled:

There was a lot of 'welt working' and 'blow time'. You could say it was rampant, most people were able to take time off the job and get away with it because the machines were running. Management would close their eyes to a lot that went on so long as production was kept up. Some people on nights were virtually never there and the job was done by somebody else, and the next week the other bloke would be off, it was the 'week about'.

The question naturally arises why did management tolerate such workers' job controls - even if they disputed their application in particular cases? Partly, it was because the chapels had the power to impose various practices willy-nilly but it was also because turning a blind eye to certain shopfloor practices kept the chapels relatively satisfied and encouraged them not to make 'excessive' demands. Moreover, despite the 'blow system' and 'welt working' the production figures in the plant were actually kept at consistently quite high rates. Ironically, it also meant that in some departments a 'work-to-rule', adopted as a sanction against management by the chapel committees, effectively backfired because it ended up with workers being even more 'productive' than previously.

The problem of overtime encapsulated the contradiction in sharp relief. Throughout the 1970s there was a massive amount of regular overtime working in the plant. Stan Livingston emphasised the obvious material gain for shopfloor workers:

The overtime rates were absolutely phenomenal. You could work four hours a day mid-week and maybe a day at the weekend. We used to call that a 'chinese weekend'. All overtime was at double time, something like £14 an hour, so some people were taking out three or four weeks' wages.

High rates of overtime working resulted partly from the inherent problems of printing 13 separate regional editions of the 'TV Times' every week, with many millions of copies, and from the fluctuating and seasonal nature of magazine production with obvious peaks and troughs during the week and at different times of the year. Formally, the chapels and union branches put limits on the overtime they were prepared to accept - in SOGAT 4 hours a week - after which each member was not offered another turn until everyone else in the factory had had the opportunity to do a stint, but in practice much more overtime became available than the chapel committee would have preferred, providing management with an extremely effective carrot to dangle in front of workers to buy shopfloor peace whilst at the same time creating inter-departmental and inter-union sectional rivalries. Frank O'Donoghue reflected:

As a trade unionist and socialist I and others felt that what we should really have been doing is not relying on overtime for a decent wage. Unfortunately, we saw in those times of high overtime people thinking pure and simply for themselves, people prepared to do somebody down to get at their overtime. That was a problem and management could use that to play one off against

the other, in some cases one department against another. It only needed a word in the right ear, 'I see the planning department are working Saturday', that's all it needed. Before you knew it there was murder. It was like dogs fighting over a bone.

Thus, there was an extremely contradictory relationship between the chapel committees and management in the Bemrose plant during the 1970s. On the one hand, the degree of power exercised by the unions through a 'strong bargaining relationship' with management was much higher than in most other manufacturing factories. On the other hand, their internal divisions and peculiar shopfloor arrangements handicapped shopfloor unity to a level much deeper than was the case elsewhere. It was a curious mixture. But if the balance of bargaining power lay to the advantage of the chapel committees during the 1970s the product market crisis of the 1980s changed the situation dramatically.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1980s

*** the early 1980s: product market crisis**

The British printing industry, under increasing competitive pressure from European companies, began to urgently embark on the task of replacing ageing machinery with new computer technology. At the same time, the economic recession of the early 1980s put the squeeze on profitability; shopfloor peace could no longer be bought at any price and many national and provincial printing companies raced to use the new technology to break the closed shop, transform working conditions and slash the number of jobs. For example, in 1978 the 'Times' newspaper management locked-out its workforce for 11 months in a bid to force changes in working practices and wrest control from chapel union organisation. Similarly, the Odhams and Sun plants in Watford and the Purnell plant in Bristol - the other two of the 'Big Three' gravure factories in the country - suffered massive job cuts and Bemrose, suffering from a chronic lack of new investment, was itself under constant threat of closure. It was a crisis in the product market which saw an abandonment of Bemrose management's 'strong bargaining relations' towards the chapel committees in favour of a more confrontational stance.

In 1979, an all-out national strike by Independent Television companies' electricians blacked out scheduled ITV programmes throughout the country and brought an abrupt halt to production of the 'TV

Times' magazine in Bemrose for 10 weeks. Although shopfloor workers were paid their full wages during this time there was a great deal of uncertainty as to the long term future of the plant; the threat posed to jobs (and the impending amalgamation of SLADE and the NGA) provided the spur for the formation of a Joint Federated Chapel Committee embracing all the chapels on site (including, for the first time, the SLADE process chapel). Unfortunately, the loss of the 'TV Times' magazine, albeit for a temporary period, was to be a foretaste of what would happen a year later at the begining of 1981, when Bemroses's single most important contract was lost completely. As Barry Caton described, the shock was devastating:

Most of the people who had just been taken on at Bemrose like me, had been taken on, on the understanding that Bemrose was printing the 'TV Times'. There was a seven year contract up for grabs and Bemrose was the only individual gravure house in the country that had the capacity to print the whole thing in one go. We'd been fairly confident we would retain it because we were doing the whole job under one roof, everything from artwork origination through finishing to dispatch. So when we heard we hadn't won the renewed contract it was like a bolt from the blue. We were confronted, yet again, with a period of about 10-12 weeks where we had no work. We were still going into work and being paid but we just sat there doing nothing. For me, that was the beginning of the slippery slope, that was when things started to come unstuck.

Officially, the loss of the 'TV Times' contract resulted from the fact that Bemrose's bid to continue printing it was undercut by its arch-rival BPCC (British Printing and Communications Corporation) owned by Robert Maxwell, who subsequently printed the magazine in six different plants across the country and dispatched it from a seventh. Whether production costs were actually cheaper - dispersing the magazine and bringing it back together again - is questionable. Certainly, there was intense speculation that Murdoch did not 'lose' the 'TV Times' contract but actually handed it over to Maxwell; the constant problem of printing an allegedly unprofitable magazine were cited; or possibly the Finnish government connection was no longer central to Murdoch's global operations? Such possibilities were impossible to confirm although tremendous intrigue surrounded the intense behind-the-scenes competition between media magnates, Rupert Murdoch and Robert Maxwell.

Not suprisingly, losing the 'TV Times' contract threw the chapel committees in Bemrose into some disarray as, yet again, the prospect of large scale redundancies loomed over the horizon. Management quickly seized the opportunity to present a 'Survival Plan' document, aimed at involving the unions in a collaborative effort to make the plant more efficient through wide ranging changes in working practices and manning arrangements. The company produced a barrage of figures to demonstrate their poor financial performance and bad labour productivity. As Stan Livingston emphasised, negotiations over the Survival Plan opened up against the background of great uncertainty as to the long-term future of the plant:

Management said they were going to negotiate the 'Survival Plan' with us. It contained things like changed job practices, more mobility and interchangeability. It was a dramatic announcement. They told us we were under threat of the whole factory collapsing, we were losing so much money. They said they had to make maximum use of the workforce available. They'd used threats of job loss in the past but this was much more serious.

Whilst talks over the Survival Plan continued, House Agreement negotiations (which had been deadlocked over disagreement with the NGA machine chapel) were abruptly suspended following a direct order from Rupert Murdoch who threatened a 7½ per cent pay offer had to be accepted within two weeks or the plant would be closed; any dispute in the interim would also precipitate closure (5). Such unexpected belligerency was enough to force the Federated Chapel's hand and the House Agreement was signed within the deadline stipulated.

Immediately afterwards, in June 1981, there were even more dramatic developments, when all FoC's, local branch secretaries and union full-time national officers were summoned to a 'Future of Bemrose' crisis meeting held at the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool. Much to everybody's amazement they were informed of the complete takeover of Bemrose by Robert Maxwell's BPCC (6). Despite the fact that Maxwell - owner of the Mirror Group Newspapers (including 'The Daily Mirror', 'Sunday Mirror', 'People' and 'Sporting Life') and with extensive interests in publishing (including Macmillan and Pergamon) and television (including Central TV) - had been

engaged in cut-throat competition with Murdoch for a number of years in the scramble to control Britain's press, he was being handed Bemrose on a plate by his foremost adversary. Barry Caton takes up the story:

Suddenly the ownership of the company changed hands. Murdoch gave the company lock, stock and barrel to Robert Maxwell. He gave him the factory, the contracts, the machinery, the management, the workforce, the whole lot. All he wanted him to give him in return was the pension fund, in cash.

The chapel committees viewed Maxwell's sudden and immediate takeover of the Bemrose plant with deep foreboding, as Stan Livingston related:

People were terrified of Maxwell, because they thought 'Here's the wheeler dealer'. He could have bought it just to flog it off. Although the funny thing is, he wasn't buying it, he was being given it by Murdoch. The way we looked at it Maxwell was picking it up so he could dispose of it, a classic asset stripping operation. We were pretty certain he would have closed us down as a way of getting rid of the competition to his BPCC plants. Maxwell owned two of the four gravure houses in the country. He'd made massive redundancies after a day or two of taking over Sun and Odhams in Watford and we could see exactly the same kind of scenario in Liverpool. We knew the only reason he would want Bemrose would be to close it down and

transfer the work to his other two plants so they could be run at full capacity. Bemrose was expendable.

On the surface, at least for a period of 10 weeks, the Murdoch-Maxwell deal was apparently in effect. Maxwell actually visited the plant, addressed a meeting of the workforce declaring 'I now own Bemrose' and moved his appointed managers onto the site, taking over operational day-to-day control. But behind the official veneer, the exchange deal had not been conclusively signed and eventually fell apart just as spectacularly as it had been cobbled together after Maxwell was apparently unable to stump up the pension fund cash required. The machinations that lay behind the on-off deal are quite complex and impossible to fathom out entirely, even if Jimmy Wilson provided a plausible explanation:

I'm convinced from what we have found out since that Rupert Murdoch was attempting to take full control of Collins, the publishers. He only had 40 per cent of the shares and Maxwell had x amount of the shares. What he attempted to do was give him Bemrose, which was worth nothing - at the time we estimated the factory was worth about £5 million over the 10 years Maxwell was going to pay him back. But for that Maxwell would get rid of a major competitor in Eric Bemrose. In return, he would sell the shares in Collins to Murdoch. They definitely did a deal. But basically the main reason Maxwell dropped it in the end was because he couldn't stump up the cash for the pension fund and the deal didn't go through.

Whatever the stratagem that lay behind the takeover deal, the whole thing had been cancelled by October 1981 when Murdoch resumed ownership of the Bemrose plant. But the immediate practical outcome was an acceleration in the implementation of the Survival Plan, placed on the table for negotiation earlier in the year. Certainly, the takeover debacle deepened the chapel committees' fears of future job prospects and induced a greater willingness to make major concessions to improve the plant's efficiency. This 'new realism' was further spurred on when the company confirmed speculation they would be launching a new, large circulation magazine to be printed at Bemrose to replace the 'TV Times'; at 6 million copies the News of the World's 'SunDay' magazine would be the second biggest gravure job in Western Europe. Although it held out the prospect of job security the company skilfully exploited the vulnerability of chapel organisation by making acceptance of the terms and conditions of the Survival Plan a pre-condition of the Bemrose plant receiving the new contract. The chapel committees could see their counterparts in other printing plants across the country acquiescing in massive changes and felt they could do little to defend their own formerly highly advantageous position.

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear the chapel committees were unduly pessimistic about their predicament; even at the time it was apparent, at least to some chapel committee representatives, that a complete capitulation by the unions was far from necessary. Once it had been announced Bemrose wished to take on the new 'SunDay' contract it became clear that News International (the owners of the News of the World) had known for some months beforehand they would be launching a new in-house

magazine, even if they were not exactly sure where it would be printed. But once Murdoch had resumed ownership of Bemrose's the Liverpool site was the obvious choice, particularly as by now the 'TV Times' contract no longer existed. In other words, Bemrose had no real intention of closing the plant down; (if they had wanted to do that they had thrown away three perfect opportunities to do so, namely during the 10-week TV electricians strike, following the loss of the 'TV Times' magazine contract or immediately after the collapse of the Maxwell takeover).

Preparing to take on the 'SunDay' magazine was a clear signal that News International intended to continue production at Bemrose, at least for the immediate future. In these circumstances, it should have been possible for the Federated Chapel to have mounted shopfloor resistance to the Survival Plan, confident that the company could have been forced to backtrack at least on some of their more draconian measures. But tremendous weight was also being placed on the SOGAT chapel committee from another quarter, as Jimmy Wilson related:

The main aim of the Survival Plan from the company's point of view was to make the place more efficient. But there was also pressure coming from the national union, so we were getting kicked from both ends, from the company and the national union. We had to be seen to be doing something. What we didn't want was to have the union officials coming in, because they would have agreed to anything.

The full-time officials claimed the Survival Plan was essential for the survival of Bemrose and that resistance would not only be futile but akin to a modern form of Luddism. A pincer movement between News International and union officials effectively forced the Bemrose workplace organisation to reluctantly submit to the bulk of the changes in working practices stipulated in the Survival Plan. Even though the Federated Chapel were subsequently able to bargain over the details of its actual implementation the Plan was severe in its overall effect. To start with, the old 'hot-metal' composing department became a victim of the new computerised technology sweeping the printing industry and was completely closed down with the loss of 93 jobs; the NGA composing chapel was disbanded (leaving only three major chapels on the site). Enforced retirement at the age of 65 reduced the workforce by another 61 people, mainly from the process department. But the most serious development involved the introduction of wide-ranging flexibility in working practices throughout the plant. The Survival Plan document stated:

The following measures have been agreed between the management and chapels in a determined effort to try to restore the company to a viable operating condition, to improve the company's ability to compete for work, both at home and abroad...the principle is accepted that, in departments where there is insufficient work, there will be no manning up to predetermined numbers...in SOGAT departments full interchangeability will apply within each department...there will be no overtime, either mid-week or at weekends, to make up

shift numbers and all overtime will relate to production requirements...there will be no restrictions whatsoever on outputs...the officers of the various chapels undertake to discourage any activity which appears detrimental to the efficiency and/or economic performance of the company. (7)

Despite the highly adverse circumstances in which the Survival Plan had been introduced the Federated Chapel were able to force management to make a quid pro quo agreement to reduce the number of different wage rates in the factory from 14 to 4 (although this still excluded the SLADE chapel which remained on its own) helping to overcome some of the traditional rivalries between the unions in the plant. Moreover, an indication of the continuing resilience of workplace chapel organisation was the campaign for parity of craft rates that ensued in 1982. The driving force behind the demand for parity was the NGA machine chapel who had seen the differential between their pay rates and the NGA '82 process chapel (formerly SLADE) widen considerably. The recent amalgamation of the two craft unions, even though separate chapels remained in Bemrose, provided a further incentive for the machine chapel to seek a levelling of craft rates within the plant and the consequential adjustment to the rates that would be paid to the non-craft SOGAT members ensured a much broader layer of support for parity generally.

After an overtime ban and work-to-rule the NGA machine chapel walked out on unofficial strike for a week before management finally agreed to open up immediate preparations for a phased equalisation of craft rates of pay. A 'Joint Working Party' was set up between the Federated

Chapel and management and by 1986, after a four year phasing-in exercise, only two craft and two non-craft rates of pay within the factory remained. In some respects, it was a most unusual achievement. Traditionally, differentials are sacrosanct within the printing industry; agreeing to uniform rates heralded a unique development. For the vast majority of the workforce in Bemrose it meant a substantial pay increase. At the same time, despite persistent internal rifts the Federated Chapel was eventually able to steer a course that united all workplace union representatives towards a common objective. Nonetheless, parity was achieved at a tremendous price to the strength of shopfloor chapel organisation. The final terms of the deal were only agreed after management threatened to cancel a new contract to print the 'Sunday Express' magazine and after full-time trade union officials had signed their agreement over the heads of the chapel committees. Moreover, the key principle underlining the deal, on which there was unanimity from chapel committees and union officials alike, stipulated:

The cost of equalising craft rates and the proportional adjustment to non-craft rates will be funded through the productivity savings generated through changes in working practices and manning arrangements aimed at improving efficiency and maximising output in all departments of the factory (8).

In other words, management only agreed to parity on the basis that it was a self-financing arrangement; the £1 $\frac{3}{4}$ million necessary

to fund it was actually raised by shopfloor workers themselves. Each year for 4 years, the productivity savings made by workers in each department were put into a 'common pool' on a pro rata basis, and a proportion of it was distributed to the workforce. For example, in the first year 80 per cent of the savings went to the unions and 20 per cent to management. Parity was achieved in four stages, 20 per cent, 40 per cent, 20 per cent and 20 per cent. Any small additional savings which exceeded the cost of parity were shared out equally among all chapels. Having previously enjoyed disproportionately high rates of pay the NGA '82 process chapel were placed in the extremely invidious position of having to agree to make productivity savings which would contribute towards achieving parity for the other chapels; apart from receiving the national printing industry minimum award their pay levels were kept at a relatively static level. Yet with the introduction of new technology, particularly laser scanners and a litho conversion unit, the process department also faced a severe cutback in jobs. However, by virtue of being half the workforce, it was the SOGAT chapel that had to make the most exorbitant sacrifices to fund the parity exercise. Barry Caton acknowledged:

Management agreed to parity because on a long-term basis it was in their interest. It was a way of whittling down staff because the major savings from it came from the non-replacement of labour. If they could make the workforce more efficient they could bring more work in and thus generate more profit...We did several things, we gave up the right to overtime cover on

holidays, we de-manned on the presses, speeds went up wherever possible, there was faster changeovers.

In the absence of any substantial investment by the company, new working methods were accepted that led to what Jimmy Wilson referred to as 'MFI' or mobility, flexibility and interchangeability; traditional lines of demarcation between departments were cut out, particularly in the process department where a new negative assembly area was set up combining the retouching, planning and camera sections (9); a programme of natural wastage which had begun earlier continued, resulting in an overall reduction of the workforce from 1400-plus to 1338; and overtime levels were virtually eradicated throughout the plant reducing the company's bill by £1.5 million. By 1986 Bemrose's apparent loss making position had been turned into a profit of £4.7 million (10).

The chapel committees lacked the ideological and political resources to resist management's encroachment on shopfloor power; their acceptance of self-financing wage increases - like their acquiescence in improved productivity - followed managerial rationality. Yet there were some important countervailing tendencies to those working to undermine shopfloor bargaining leverage. Ironically, despite the reduction in labour achieved through natural wastage, management soon discovered the sheer volume of production meant they had to employ an extra 100 NGA printers and SOGAT assistants in the machine room and other departments; this brought the overall numbers employed in the plant by 1986 back to previous levels; even the amount of overtime was increased slightly in certain departments.

This meant that for many shopfloor workers the plant appeared to have been cushioned from the full rigours of the recession and avalanche of redundancies occurring elsewhere in Liverpool. Moreover, although management had encroached on previously 'excessive' shopfloor working practices and 'overmanning' of machines, the chapel committees still retained control over many aspects of their immediate work situation; even if management felt much more confident in confronting the power of the chapels they were by no means able to get their own way on every issue.

On the other hand, the relatively much more co-operative relationship with management established during the 1980s did reflect a significant shift of the balance of bargaining power to the disadvantage of chapel union organisation. Two factors, both internal and external, reinforced this trend. Firstly, there was the removal of Jimmy Wilson as SOGAT chapel FoC and his expulsion from the union by full-time officials; this dissipated the energies of the SOGAT chapel committee and impaired its bargaining effectiveness vis-a-vis management (see forthcoming section). Secondly, there was the impact of the defeats in struggle for key sections of the trade union movement. In November 1983 ranks of riot police repeatedly baton-charged NGA '82 pickets outside the printworks of the 'Stockport Messenger' in Warrington, where with the help of Tory government anti-union legislation, Eddie Shah had set up a non-union factory equipped with computer technology. The effect on many shopfloor workers from Bemrose who attended the nearby picket line was devastating, as Stan Livingston described:

When people saw what was going on they said 'Good God, is this Britain?' They were very shocked by it, when they saw that militia coming out smacking people over their heads with truncheons. The effect it had was the opposite of what we had wanted. It was clearly shown to the people who went what was to come if you tried to beat Thatcherism, if you ever really tried anything on. If anything it fed the feeling you can't win. The NGA had a hut there and it just got turned over, smashed to bits. I mean, its like someone knocking your house down, ye know. That's our little castle, it was a psychological blow. The effect was to terrify many people.

The defeat of the national miners' strike of 1984-5 was another psychological blow; having regularly made financial contributions to NUM pickets from local pits in Lancashire its impact was felt quite deeply in Bemrose. Even more important was Rupert Murdoch's defeat of the bitter long-drawn out strike by 5,000 sacked print workers at News International's Wapping plant in 1986-7 which signalled the scale of the transformation taking place in Britain's newspaper and printing industry. Two direct appeals for solidarity industrial action by Bemrose workers, made by coachloads of pickets from Wapping, were turned down out of fear that it would only give Murdoch the excuse to shut the Liverpool plant. It was a painful reminder of how weak chapel organisation had become.

*** 1987-1991: redundancies and closure**

The decisive blow to shopfloor chapel strength was delivered in April 1987 when management announced 775 redundancies, a 60 per cent reduction of the workforce from 1342 to 567, involving the total closure of certain areas of the factory, including the 'front-end' of the process department, the replacement of the in-house transport department by News International's own TNT distribution network and the sub-contracting of catering, cleaning and security. The justification offered for such a massive re-organisation of production was the loss of the 'Sunday Express' magazine contract to Robert Maxwell's BPCC organisation, a loss of revenue of £10 million. There was no room for negotiation either on the level of the job losses decreed by management nor on the company's arbitrary selection of individuals. The Federated Chapel launched an immediate public campaign of opposition to the redundancies; publishing a 12-page glossy information brochure and winning support from local Labour MP's. But the unions' response was fatally handicapped by a number of problems.

Firstly, the chapel committees' previous acceptance of management's ideological justification for increased labour productivity to hold down costs in face of external competition had effectively led to an acceptance of the logic of job losses; it also helped to demobilise any militant rank and file opposition that could potentially have been mounted. Secondly, there was the continuing dispute between the SOGAT FoC and full-time local and national union officials, which considerably undermined the authority of the chapel committee and resulted in the union's refusal to provide assistance whilst Jimmy Wilson remained in office. Thirdly, the

redundancies came shortly after the company had announced outline plans to build a completely new newspaper printing plant on a 'greenfield site' in the neighbouring borough of Knowsley (to print the 'Sun', 'News of the World', 'Today', 'Times' and 'Sunday Times'). Many workers not chosen for redundancy believed that, despite a reduction in manning levels in Aintree, they would be able to get jobs in the new Knowsley plant, undermining their opposition to the job cuts. Fourthly, the high average age of a sizeable proportion of those chosen for redundancy encouraged many shopfloor workers to accept the decision as a fait accompli.

What had been once an extremely powerful shopfloor chapel organisation effectively collapsed without so much as a whisper of a fightback as management rode roughshod over the Federated Chapel's muted protests. Barry Caton explained:

The argument was about having some control over redundancies not about the principle of redundancies, that was accepted virtually from the word go. All along the negotiations were aimed at minimising the redundancies. There was never a fightback as such. Don't forget all this came after Wapping. We just tried to keep as many people as possible. We suggested a 'last in, first out' and management categorically rejected that. We asked if they would accept volunteers first, they said no. Every proposal and every step on the road they said no.

The redundancy exercise effectively broke the back of shopfloor chapel organisation in the Bemrose plant. The NGA '82 process

chapel saw a reduction in labour of 75 per cent from 208 to 52; the SOGAT chapel was cut by more than half from 706 to 338 and the NGA '82 machine chapel from 174 to 86. At the same time, each of the chapel committees suffered a deep haemorrhage within their ranks; every member of the NGA '82 process chapel committee was made redundant except for the FoC (and Federated Chapel chairman) Stan Livingston; many of the key SOGAT committee activists were also sacked, except for Jimmy Wilson - who having been forced to resign as FoC and facing expulsion from the union no longer posed any serious threat to the company; there was a similar loss of union activists in the NGA '82 machine chapel, although the FoC actually took voluntary redundancy. Management continued to press home their advantage with the remaining workforce. A number of union facilities were immediately withdrawn, including 100 per cent time off-work for each of the three chapel FoC's, and the facility to hold both chapel committee and full chapel meetings within the factory was taken away. The balance of bargaining power was wrenched decisively in favour of management. Tommy Brown recalled:

Management's attitude totally altered from the Monday morning after the redundancies when they came in wielding the big stick. 'You will do this, you will do that'. No negotiation. 'If you don't like it get your coat on and get out'. At every opportunity management tried to ridicule the unions, 'Now I've got you down I'm going to keep you that way'.

To all intents and purposes, management ignored previously negotiated House Agreements and treated the Federated Chapel with utter disdain. For example, in 1988 they announced the termination of all existing agreements and issued draft proposals for a completely new package that included: pay rises that took no account of the British Printing Industry Federation national minimum awards, an agreement that would last for fifteen months instead of twelve, no strikes and no involvement by local full-time union officials in the chapels' affairs (11). In 1989 they even threatened to introduce individual contracts and withdraw recognition from the unions for negotiation purposes unless the Federated Chapel accepted a 7.5 per cent pay offer (12). Management eventually backtracked on most of these original demands but only because such threats successfully enabled them to force compliance over some key issues of dispute; they were able to ram through many other significant changes despite the chapel committees' protests. Stan Livingston explained:

The last two or three years' House Agreements were almost a non-negotiation in real terms, there wasn't any free collective bargaining by any stretch of the imagination. It was a matter of what you could persuade them to keep - never mind improve things. It was looked on almost as a victory if we held onto something, if we stopped them taking something away from us.

The transformation of working practices proceeded apace.

In the process chapel the changes in production methods and changed work practices accounted for something like a 40 per cent increase in output per man after the redundancies. For instance, in my own department - the carbon printing department - I had to develop a cyclinder in a tank and prepared my next job at the same time whereas I would only have done one at a time before. Managers involved themselves in the job where they never did before. There was a lot more flexibility. SOGAT members were moved from the finishing department to the machine room and back again if they were wanted later on in the shift.

Ironically, the massive cutback in jobs and changes to working practices of the past had been justified on the grounds of low productivity, providing international rivals with a competitive advantage. Now that particular barrier had been removed and the company had been returned to profitability. But the long-term threat of closure remained. It illustrated how the 'efficiency' and 'viability' of the plant had little to do with the productivity of the workers involved. Significantly, rapid advances in printing technology had made it possible to directly print colour pages into many daily newspapers (such as the 'Daily Mirror') making the pre-printed colour re-winds that Bemrose specialised in increasingly outmoded, whilst new printing methods such as web offset were overtaking the factory's photo-gravure operation. Yet despite repeated shopfloor requests throughout the 1980s Bemrose had consistently refused to embark on an investment programme in either machinery or plant to secure the site's future. In fact, despite a profit of £9 million in 1989 Bemrose

provocatively declared its intention to repay News International 'accumulated losses' from previous years of £12 million (13).

Finally, in May 1990 News International effectively declared the death knell of the factory after confirming the transfer of the contract for the 'SunDay' magazine to the West German publishing and printing group Burda GmbH. The £220 million deal - the largest in the European magazine market - was part of Rupert Murdoch's strategy to prepare for the removal of trade barriers in 1992 (14). The loss of the 'SunDay', which accounted for 85 per cent of the Bemrose workload, led to a further 413 redundancies. There was no resistance to the job losses. About 160 workers were kept on for another twelve months to complete various contractual obligations before the factory was finally closed at the end of 1991, whilst only about 90 ex-Bemrose workers were employed at News International's high-tech newspaper plant in Knowsley.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO RANK AND FILE MEMBERS: THE 1970s AND 80s

*** the 1970s: benevolent control from above**

In many respects the Bemrose chapel committees' had a relatively close and accountable relationship to their rank and file members during the early 1970s. The SOGAT chapel committee was composed of about 15 shopfloor representatives elected from production areas such as the machine room and finishing department (on the basis of one committee member per shift) and non-production areas such as the warehouse and ink mill (on the basis of one committee member per department). Each individual committee rep was elected by a ballot of the entire chapel membership for a two year term of office, with half the committee up for re-election every year. Monthly committee meetings were held inside the factory, although usually outside working hours. A small executive committee - composed of the Father of the Chapel (FoC), deputy FoC, secretary, chairman and treasurer - administered the chapel's day-to-day affairs. All committee members (including the FoC until 1976) held full-time jobs on the shopfloor but were able to obtain a limited amount of time-off to attend to grievances and union business at management's discretion.

At the heart of the committee's shopfloor strength was the day-to-day control it exercised over the manning of jobs, movement of labour and overtime rotas, through the operation of a seniority system. According to Tommy Brown, the job experience and bargaining ability of the

SOGAT committee members was viewed with some respect by rank and file members:

When I started in Bemrose I was shown round the factory by the committee man who told me the do's and don'ts. Well, you couldn't really sneeze without consulting the committee man then - they'd boxed everything, the overtime, they sorted the holidays out. At the time management accepted quite readily the unions were in charge.

Contesting of committee positions varied between chapels. Apart from the Father of the Chapel (FoC) there was not a great deal of competition for other places on the SLADE process chapel committee, although this did not necessarily reflect a lack of participation. On the contrary, in many areas of the process department chapel members took it in turns to hold a committee position with the incumbent stepping down after a short period in office, thereby nullifying the need for a formal election contest. By contrast, there was a much more obvious level of involvement within the NGA machine chapel. According to Bob Henderson:

All through the '70s everyone wanted to be on the committee, well let's say ten per cent of the chapel wanted to be on the committee. There'd be a regular contest, you'd get a couple of candidates for the position...Once we had a vote of no confidence in the FoC because of a shabby deal he'd made and all the committee resigned. About half the committee were re-

elected but there was about nineteen candidates for the ten positions.

There was a similar level of active participation in the SOGAT chapel. Barry Caton related:

It was very rare for someone to be elected unopposed. You would generally have someone, young and up and coming, and the sitting tenant. Once you ousted the sitting tenant you could guarantee the next election he would be nominated to oppose you. So you would always have two people vying for positions, sometimes there was three or four.

The tenure of office also varied. Within the SLADE process chapel the turnover of many committee positions was generally quite regular, about every two years. In contrast, within the NGA machine chapel there tended to be a larger core of longer serving committee representatives, whilst in the SOGAT chapel only a handful of committee reps were permanent fixtures, namely the FoC, deputy FoC and treasurer and a few other individuals. Mass meetings of the whole workforce, embracing members of all chapels, were rarely held; sectional meetings, of members within particular departments, were occasionally organised; but the chief forum for the direct accountability of committee representatives to rank and file members were chapel meetings, held at local union branch offices three, four or six times a year in the NGA machine, SOGAT and SLADE process chapels respectively. The procedure at these membership meetings was

usually extremely formal, complementing the highly efficient administrative arrangements of the chapel committees and their meticulous minute book keeping. Strict union rules enforced by the committee - such as fines or disciplinary action for non-attendance at meetings - reinforced the cohesiveness of the chapel and its collective interests.

About 90 women were employed in the plant prior to 1987, concentrated in the finishing department where they worked alongside male SOGAT members. The chapel committee successfully negotiated an equal pay agreement in 1972, the first SOGAT chapel on Merseyside to do so; holidays and general working conditions in Bemrose were also the same for both men and women. Partly, this was a result of the influence of the two women representatives on the chapel committee, including a Mother of the Chapel (MoC), and the pressure of rank and file women members themselves. Partly, it was because of the role played by the left-wing SOGAT chapel FoC. As Jimmy Wilson related:

By and large there were always two women on the committee. They weren't that trade union or politically orientated, they were just women looking after women's issues and quite rightly making sure they weren't being given inferior conditions. You had to pressurise them to take on the positions, on the basis that if you didn't have a woman representative on the committee you wouldn't get a fair crack of the whip. You had to force them into the position. It depended on the characteristics of some of the committee men - if they were anti-women you always

got a woman on, because there were people who did take advantage of the women in terms of doing their job on overtime.

Cathy Kewley, a rank and file SOGAT member in the finishing department throughout the 1970s and '80s, described some of the problems the women faced on the shopfloor:

There was an argument when I first started in the area where the girls worked, where we sorted out the 'TV Times'. The committee man wanted his men to work overtime on the job the girls were doing and there was murder between the committee man and the MoC. There was fighting and arguing and everything on the floor. He was working downstairs but he wanted the men to come up and take the job off those girls and get the money for it. It was the same when the girls were working the 3-11 shift - they were working at night but they weren't allowed to work overtime until the morning, it had to go to the men. It was a bit bad really. But Jimmy Wilson sorted it out and the women went onto a night shift and the overtime went to the women on whose job it was, and it was fair.

Yet the prejudices of some male committee members did not prevent the women from seeking representation from others whenever necessary:

You always had committee men you could go to. If the MoC was off - say on her holidays or something - the women would go to a man who was on the committee, depending on who he was. A lot of times you would be wasting your time talking to the committee man we had upstairs, so you would go downstairs and find another one or take it straight to the FoC.

It is significant that, compared with the FoC, chapel committee members generally did not play as prominent a role in shaping the outcome of most of the key issues facing rank and file workers. Of course, it is true committee members were involved in dealing with shopfloor grievances and formulating chapel policy. Monthly chapel committee meetings were also an important forum for debate, as Barry Caton pointed out:

If there was a situation that occurred outside of an agreement that wasn't of major consequence, then we would debate a policy. The committee discussed everything that went on in the factory, the fair and equal distribution of the overtime, the production requirements and production outputs. The committee decided a policy that would be uniform throughout the factory.

On the other hand, committee members were viewed purely as an auxiliary to the key bargaining role carried out on behalf of the chapel by the FoC (and deputy FoC and secretary) who for example, travelled down to London for House Agreement negotiations with Bruce Matthews of News International. The pivotal role of the FoC was considerably enhanced in

1977 after management provided office facilities for each of the four separate chapels within the plant and successfully encouraged each of the FoC's to take 100 per cent time-off work to represent their members. Jimmy Wilson outlined the key factor underlining management's new strategy and his misgivings about his full-time status as SOGAT chapel FoC:

Management offered it in my opinion because of the threat they were on on a daily basis. You've got to picture it that when you went in on a Monday morning it was a powder keg - that only went phsssshh every week - but nevertheless it was ready to explode. They were obviously aware of the tactics being adopted by the union. Hence they thought we might as well have him here so we don't have to send out for him, so they can deal with the problems as they arise every day. But it was certainly not my wish to be a full-time FoC because I firmly believe, and I did then, it was one of the fundamental mistakes in the trade union movement, of isolating people. Because as has been proved right you do become isolated from the feeling on the floor.

Yet Jimmy Wilson was undoubtedly regarded with tremendous respect by SOGAT chapel committee and shopfloor union members alike. Representing a wide range of members scattered across every department in the factory he was uniquely placed to keep abreast of day-to-day developments and offer a strategic form of leadership. Barry Caton commented:

I can't remember anyone ever being put up against him. As an FoC, as far as I was concerned, he was superb. He was the most complete FoC you'll ever come across. His facts, figures, his contacts - pensions, wages, anything you wanted to discuss. He was a shrewed organiser, a negotiator, he was the type of guy who could put a price on anything.

Steve Hewes, a SOGAT chapel committee representative for a number of years in the finishing department, spoke for many others when he paid tribute to his role within the plant:

The first thing he would do when he went into work he went to every department, he went through all the transport information, so he knew what was going in and going out. He would go into every office, look what was on the board, what was getting produced, how many, where for. Every aspect Jimmy knew and management let him because they knew he was competent in his job. He knew everything about the place, he was an oracle. People wanted to tell him everything so he had that ability. Jimmy's committee was such that whoever was on the shift that touched him - earlys or afternoons - he took them into meetings with management, they were his men. They didn't speak around the table independently, everything went through Jimmy, but he made sure they were well aware of the agreements, the history of the place.

Certainly, the substantive gains achieved by the SOGAT chapel committee with Jimmy Wilson at the helm during the 1970s - including high wage rates, substantial control over manning and strong union organisation - are testimony to the FoC's influential leadership abilities. His lengthy tenure of office - which lasted for seventeen years from 1971-1987 - was further evidence of the confidence consistently expressed by shopfloor members. (By comparison, during the same period there were five different FoC's in both the SLADE process and NGA machine chapels.) Nonetheless, the nature of the bargaining system - with its formal House Agreements - and the structure of workplace union organisation - with its highly autonomous collection of separate chapels and full-time FoC's - facilitated the development of a highly centralised form of leadership within the chapel committees, a process accentuated even further within the SOGAT chapel by the long-standing intervention of the highly influential FoC. As Barry Caton reflected:

The general was on the pinnacle of the pyramid, there was no sort of intermediate structure, there was no heir apparent. One of the things I used to say is that it would be a disastrous day if Jimmy Wilson ever walked out onto Long Lane and got knocked over by a bus. A lot of us on the committee wouldn't have known what was going on. Jimmy kept a lot of things to himself. Obviously he had confidantes but two of his deputies - although they held office - they certainly never did the job, and that suited Jimmy. He could go and do his own thing and he

had them in tow. Jimmy could run rings round them and get virtually everything he wanted.

Jimmy Wilson himself recognised the problem of a chapel committee whose role was strictly circumscribed:

That's right. Regrettably on looking back, that was one of the mistakes we made. The responsibility was left more with the FoC and deputy and the committee men, other than holidays and overtime, the committee men didn't play much of a role. They just reported the issue, went to see the FoC.

Contact between the FoC and departmental managers and supervisors was frequent and concerned not only negotiable issues of terms and conditions of employment but also production difficulties, work allocations and output levels. Frank O'Donoghue explained:

He met with management on a regular basis to discuss productivity - which was monitored by both parties - so that agreed levels of productivity were arrived at, so that could be used for negotiating purposes. He was always constantly made aware of exactly where we were on production schedules at any given time of the day. If there was a problem on any particular job, where we were likely to be behind the schedule, he was always made aware of that and he always kept his eye on it.

Having previously negotiated House Agreements stipulating production targets the FoC was obliged, on occasion, to encourage shopfloor rank and file members to increase their pace of work. Tommy Brown remarked:

Say we were coming round to pay negotiations. He would say 'I've told management that we'll produce x amount of copies per week. Now you've got to be seen to be making it work - if you want the extra £10 a week pay rise'. If people were sluggish - with some people trying to create overtime - he'd have a say so.

Despite the fact this involved Jimmy Wilson in a quasi-managerial role the FoC's advice was, if sometimes reluctantly, complied with, essentially because in general terms his bargaining approach appeared to 'deliver the goods' in terms of high pay awards and advantageous working conditions. As Steve Hewes noted:

There was always that much more to gain in respect to overtime and working conditions that whenever the FoC said 'management are within their rights, it's within the agreement' it was generally accepted. People might voice their disagreement, and it would be taken on board and dealt with. In the main, it didn't occur because they were all doing so well.

At the heart of the relationship between the chapel committees and rank and file members was the nature of sectional

organisation inside the Bemrose plant. As was noted earlier, the sectional strength of the various chapels was dependent not simply on their strength against management but also on their ability to exclude other workers who were not members of the same chapel from certain aspects of the production process, maintained by job demarcation. This sectional organisation was traditionally very successful. For many years workers could improve their wages and conditions without engaging in widespread or militant activity. The number of actual strikes was quite small and they usually involved very few workers and ended very quickly.

But this had an inevitable impact on the organisation and consciousness of Bemrose workers, breeding among the great majority a tradition of moderation and of only being interested in what happened in the particular section of the particular union they belonged to. It also meant they tended to rely on the chapel officials to do things for them, to act on their behalf. The strength and loyalty to the chapel arising from this sort of organisation meant that when the chapel committees called for action they got it. But it also meant there was no opposition when the, usually token, action was called off, and there was little independent initiative outside of established chapel procedures as hardly any of the rank and file were prepared to challenge the official chapel leadership.

Even though sanctions aimed at hitting production were often collectively agreed at SOGAT chapel meetings they were usually initiated, tightly organised and strictly controlled from above by the FoC and committee members. Frank O'Donoghue related:

If we were coming up to the yearly House Agreements and management were sticking on particular points that we felt we had an excellent case on, we might threaten to use a tactic such as working to rule, or an overtime ban if necessary. We would pick on a department with the least amount of people but who could cause the maximum amount of chaos to take action on behalf of the chapel to put pressure on management.

Spontaneous rank and file disputes were few and far between and on the rare occasion a 'wildcat' stoppage of work did occur it was invariably quickly brought under chapel committee control. For the FoC, such shopfloor discipline helped bolster a 'strong bargaining relationship' with management. As Jimmy Wilson remarked:

Once the management seen that you'd evaluated the situation and done your homework and you were quite as strong with your own members as you were with the management in an organised and disciplined form of way - that you wouldn't take arbitrary stoppages on the shopfloor willy-nilly, everything had to be conducted through the meetings - once they seen that there was a person of authority, whilst they didn't like you at least they came to respect you, because you meant what you said and when we pursued a claim we justified it.

A comparison can be made with other manufacturing workers, many of whom are much worse organised and much less powerful than

in Bemrose. It is partly because of this very weakness that sections of the rank and file in such workplaces are more likely to act independently of the 'top table'; paradoxically, it is their weakness that forces them to generalise, to seek support from other sections. Clearly, this was not the case at Bemrose where chapels were able to stop or threaten production without the need to ask other chapels for solidarity. The idea grew up that solidarity action was not only not needed but that it was better for workers to go to work and take the money than to stop work in support. After all, with strong demaraction no workers would do the work of the few striking workers.

Not only was this attitude adopted towards members of different chapels in dispute but it also meant members of the same chapel would usually continue working normally. Yet the isolation of action to the particular section of the particular chapel in which it occurred had the general effect of demobilising the self-activity of rank and file workers and reinforcing interdepartmental sectionalism. It threw away the valuable opportunity of forging shopfloor links across individual chapels and building up a united approach to management across the plant. Whilst there was a layer of activists at chapel level engaged in day-to-day union activity there was no equivalent of the joint shop stewards' committee that predominates in manufacturing industry. The Federated Chapel was merely an umbrella body that came together for formal House Agreement negotiations. Not only did it exclude the SLADE process chapel (effectively until 1986) but it also played only a minimal role in terms of formulating claims, day-to-day negotiation and the monitoring of agreements, which instead was undertaken by the respective chapel committees.

*** the 1980s: flawed political leadership**

Throughout the 1980s the influence of left-wing political activists within the chapel committees inside the Bemrose plant was an important factor to be taken into consideration. Jimmy Wilson, the SOGAT chapel FoC was a leading supporter of the far-left 'Militant Tendency' and actively involved in the Liverpool Labour Party. A number of other individual SOGAT members, some of them committee members, were also left-wing Labour Party activists. At first glance this left-wing influence may seem a paradox. After all, print workers have traditionally been regarded as rather conservative politically. Seemingly within the NGA machine chapel this picture appeared to have been the case, at least among a section of the rank and file membership. According to Bob Henderson:

I would say that about 40 per cent of the chapel voted Tory. You see the more money they have the more they change, they move in better circles, their spots do fade. You couldn't really talk about Labour Party politics in the golf club or yachting club where some of our members went.

Despite this apparent conservatism the NGA machine chapel had within its ranks a sprinkling of left-wing Labour Party activists and the deputy FoC of the NGA composing room chapel during the early 1980s was Tony Mulhearn, a leading supporter of 'Militant', President of the Liverpool Labour Party and one of the 47 councillors surcharged and disqualified from office after being in the forefront of a bruising battle

against Tory government ratecapping. As Bob Henderson acknowledged, they were elected to office because:

They were the best of those who put up irrespective of politics. The average person voted for them to represent them on the shopfloor because a person who was not going to open their mouth was no good.

Even in the highly craft conscious SLADE process chapel the role of certain socialist inclined individuals was important. Stan Livingston explained:

A handful of individuals were instrumental in building up the chapel besides myself, like Bob Henning. We all thought the same politically as far as socialism was concerned. We were all socialist minded, but not active in terms of the Labour Party. All our activities were centred on Bemrose, we weren't involved in anything outside the factory.

Undoubtedly, 'Militant' had the most political influence in Bemrose, particularly within the SOGAT chapel. Barry Caton observed:

Right up until the redundancies in 1987 'Militant' had a lot of supporters in the factory, about a dozen at least. Tony Mulhearn was the star man, he was a leading light in Militant. He was the deputy FoC for the NGA comps - but that was more a

honorary position given his other responsibilities on the City Council. On the SOGAT committee there was Dave Power and Paul Kinnington. Geoff Barker was a Labour councillor on the Wirral. And there was Jimmy Wilson.

'Militant' also had supporters in the NGA machine chapel. Bob Henderson recalled:

Within the chapel we had a lot of people in the Labour Party and there was a hard core of 'Militant', we had quite a section of those people. Nicky Sandiford was a Militant Left and there were some on the committee.

Operating inside the Labour Party Militant's fortunes changed dramatically after 1979 with the rise of the Bennite Left. In 1983 their supporters captured control of Liverpool City Council. The prominence of the Labour Council's fight against Conservative government ratecapping led to a substantial growth in their support on Merseyside, although by 1986 this had begun to falter as 'Kinnockism' began to take deep root inside the Labour Party and the trade union movement in the wake of the miners' defeat and the collapse of the councils' resistance. Significantly, partly because of their particular brand of politics (necessarily ambiguous given the constraints of the wider social democratic organisation to which they attached themselves) and partly because of a Labour Party witchhunt (notably the expulsion of 5 members of the editorial board in 1983) the

supporters of 'Militant' in Bemrose did not openly organise politically on the shopfloor. Barry Caton explained:

They stood for committee men but they never operated as a political faction in the factory. When we had a meeting you could tell they's caucused beforehand though but they didn't have a real workplace base to their politics. They saw their role as being active in the Labour Party. Whilst they were good trade unionists they saw the way forward as moving resolutions in the Labour Party. Organising on the shopfloor was secondary to that. They were more concerned with achieving positions within the chapel and using that as a springboard to get positions within the Labour Party. They saw the Labour Party as a panacea for all ills and all their energies went into trying to transform it.

The other side of the same political coin was an emphasis on trying to replace right wing full-time union officials with left wingers, through 'Broad Left' groupings, with 'Militant' supporters in the SOGAT chapel seeing their primary task as backing up the bargaining activities of the FoC and his attempt to capture control of the lower echelons of the union machine for the Left at quarterly branch meetings. Because Jimmy Wilson was in a prominent position in both the chapel and union branch they did not consider the strengthening of independent shopfloor organisation through workplace struggle that built workers' confidence, organisation and political consciousness to be the main

priority. But their strategy merely served to nurture a reliance on Jimmy Wilson which discouraged rank and file activity, neglected independent political intervention and disarmed chapel members from preparing for the kind of all-out fight that would have been the only real guarantee of successfully resisting management's offensive (and of defending Jimmy Wilson from his removal as FoC and expulsion from the union).

All the inherent shortcomings in the relationship between the chapel committees and their rank and file members in the Bemrose plant, particularly in terms of the political leadership provided, were exposed in bold relief during the product market crises of the early 1980s. The Maxwell takeover debacle and subsequent Murdoch re-acquisition was a severe test of the chapels' capacity to defend shopfloor organisation. But the chapel committees were unable to provide the political justification for mounting a rearguard action to resist the terms and conditions of the 'Survival Plan' subsequently introduced by Murdoch. Even the Militant supporters, despite general expressions of opposition, did not put forward a concrete plan of action around which resistance could be generated. Many rank and file members, for lack of an alternative approach, accepted the arguments put by management and full-time union officials, that their highly advantageous shopfloor position of the 1970s could no longer be maintained in the 1980s; wide ranging changes in working practices were the necessary price for long-term job security. As Stan Livingston emphasised:

To some extent a lot of us accepted there had to be changes, that eventually change had to come. You had to be realistic about it, with government legislation against the unions and

everything going on around you. Of course you had to accept there was going to be some changes.

Reluctantly accepting change in working practices as part of an organised retreat was one thing; actively co-operating in its application as part of a joint effort to improve 'efficiency' was, however, something else entirely. In many respects, the quasi-managerial role adopted by chapel FoC's in the 1970s had not helped prepare the ground for an independent shopfloor response to the product market difficulties of the 1980s. Moreover, the newly formed (joint) Federated Chapel effectively transformed itself into a Joint Working Party, bringing together up to 20 chapel committee members (excluding branch and national officials) in semi-permanent meetings with management; at least 50 meetings of the JWP were held over a four year period to negotiate the equalisation of craft rates (15). Underlining the whole process was a belief that changes in working practices were necessary to achieve parity and to help make the company profitable. Yet by accepting shopfloor responsibility for the 'viability' of the Bemrose plant the chapel committees hamstrung any effective challenge to the re-organisation of production that ensued. It was an illustration of how far the shopfloor leadership accepted managerial logic and lacked the political resources to pose any alternative approach. Not that the chapel committees lacked such resources any more than they had in the 1970s. But in the 1980s there was a disproportion between this deficiency and its practical consequences. It was precisely in this disproportion that the ebb of shopfloor power in Bemrose was expressed during this period.

Of course, there was no certainty that if the chapel committees had raised the banner of militant resistance rank and file members would have responded. But arguably, there was no fatalistic inevitability about the unfolding drama. The quality of shopfloor leadership, although only one element in a complex equation, could potentially have altered the outcome of developments, even if not decisively given the lack of investment and ultimately outmoded nature of the plant's machinery. This is not to underestimate the real problems posed to a purely plant based trade union locus of action in times of economic recession to thwart managerial intentions, especially at the level of corporate activity. But for all its sophistication and corporate power News International were still dependent upon the goodwill of the Bemrose workforce, whose collective strength could potentially have given them an important leverage.

Despite the disciplinary action taken against him by the national union the SOGAT chapel membership in Bemrose provided loyal backing for Jimmy Wilson, spurning demands he resign from the FoC position. Yet in general terms the chapel committees' more co-operative relationship with management inevitably had an effect on their relationship with rank and file members. There is no real evidence of a dramatic reduction in attendance at chapel meetings or of a change in the contesting of committee positions or tenure of office. But with virtually all key decisions affecting the life of the plant being taken at top-level Joint Working Party meetings the chapel committees' role became much diminished. Rank and file members became even more passive spectators of decisions taken from

above rather than being actively encouraged to shape the outcome of events themselves from below.

The atrophy of chapel organisation was exposed in graphic relief by the redundancy exercise of 1987. Instead of campaigning for strike action to defend jobs the chapel committees accepted the company's decision as *fait accompli*. Attempting to force News International to withdraw the redundancies was a formidable hurdle that was by no means guaranteed to succeed. Yet it is possible determined action at an early stage - to stop production of the 'SunDay' magazine - could have put sufficient pressure to force Murdoch's hand. Even if some of the older shopfloor members were prepared to take the redundancy money there was a sizeable section of the workforce who were not. With a decisive lead from the chapel committees it is possible they could have been galvanized into action. Steve Hewes noted:

When we heard about the redundancies there was a buzz on the shopfloor. The people I worked with, they were all new. We got together and were amazed the machines were still running. But stopping the machines would have created a problem on the shopfloor which Jimmy Wilson would have had to go down and address. People were aware of that and that's why it didn't happen. People said 'No, keep it going, wait for Jimmy Wilson to come down and administer the bread, there's no way Jimmy is going to let 775 people go out of this plant, he's never lost a job before and he never will.'

Barry Caton believed a potential focus for action was thrown away:

The company told us the transport was being given out to TNT. TNT weren't thought off very highly in the light of the Wapping dispute. When we went into work one day there was a TNT trailer parked outside. Our members approached the committee man on site including myself that he shouldn't be loaded in view of what had gone on at Wapping and in view of the fact that management were clearly not negotiating with us at all. We went to the loading bay and the lads said they didn't want him on the premises. So we told the driver to fuck off out of it. At the end of the day though we had a site meeting of committee men and fellas off the loading bay. We were advised by Jimmy Wilson it would be in our best interests to load the fella up and what a difficult situation the company were in. That would have been a focus for a fight with the company, not necessarily a full scale dispute but at least it would have said to the company you haven't smashed us, we still find certain issues disagreeable and this is what we're going to do about it. But the company never budged on any issue right throughout the 90 days and we never forced them to do anything, and that is a criticism.

The tradition of relying on the FoC's bargaining abilities meant that instead of acting for themselves most rank and file members continued to look upwards for something to be pulled out of the hat. Barry Caton pointed out:

Jimmy Wilson was looked upon with a great amount of awe because he had delivered the goods. Every year he delivered a better deal than the national union. I think our members thought - and you always got the impression from Jimmy - 'he's got something up his sleeve' and 95 per cent of the time he had. But on this occasion he didn't.

The tradition of 'strong bargaining relations' with management in which the chapel committees had felt little need to call on their members to take action meant they became paralysed by Bemroses's intransigence over the redundancies.

After the 1987 redundancies the relationship of the chapel committees to the members was completely transformed. To begin with each chapel committee suffered a loss of personnel within its ranks including a number of left-wing activists, Jimmy Wilson was forced to resign from the FoC position within the SOGAT chapel following pressure from national and local full-time union officials and management withdraw 100 per cent facility time from all chapel FoC's. The emasculated chapel committees found themselves with little authority in the eyes of either members or management. Bob Henderson, who took over the FoC position in the NGA '82 machine chapel reflected:

The FoC was tolerated by the membership but was not going to be permitted to get out of line. I felt as if my committee had been appointed for me by the management not by the workforce. I had two chargehands on the committee, that would never have happened prior to '87. But it was to keep the FoC in check, 'Don't go off with any ideas about taking management on over anything'. They feared that any rocking the boat was going to lose them their job, their redundancy money. Really the effect of '87 was for people to keep their head down.

In conclusion, it is clear there was a marked transformation in the relationship between the chapel committees and rank and file members in Bemrose during the 1980s. At the heart of the problem was the Federated Chapel/Joint Working Party's co-operative relationship with management which diminished the importance of the respective chapel committees and in turn impoverished the relationship with shopfloor members.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO UNION OFFICIALS

*** the 1970s: a gulf between chapel and officials**

Each of the separate chapels in Bemrose fell under the wider authority of geographically organised trade union branches - for example linking together all the different SOGAT chapels across the Merseyside area into one umbrella structure - connected to union representation at regional and national level. With a combined membership of between 1,500-2,000 the Merseyside SOGAT branch met on a quarterly basis at its union offices in north Liverpool and elected a branch committee through a workplace ballot of the whole membership, consisting mainly of chapel FoCs and other lay members. The branch secretary was a full-time union official responsible for overseeing the branch's activities and assisting workplace chapel organisation. The Bemrose SOGAT chapel regularly sent delegates to union branch meetings and played an active part in its affairs.

Each union branch had two quite distinct roles to play. Firstly, they acted as labour exchanges. If Bemrose wanted to employ additional labour it notified the FoC and local branch of the union concerned, which nominated a number of workers for the jobs. In this way, the trade unions were able to ensure that only union labour was hired and also to control the amount of such labour offering itself for work at the plant. Secondly, the branches gave advice and support to members and their

representatives. Administrative contacts took place between the chapels and branches fairly frequently on matters concerned with employment, wages, interpretations of agreements, union communications, the conduct of ballots, finance, etc. There was also contact between the chapel committees and union full-time officials whenever disputes occurred or when major changes in working practices or methods were proposed.

On the one hand, chapel committees at Bemrose enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. The relatively large size of each of the chapels at Bemrose - among the largest in their respective union branches - ensured a highly sophisticated form of autonomous workplace organisation, which was further enhanced with the provision of 100 per cent time off work for FoCs. Although the level of struggle was not high it was the general level of confidence on the shopfloor vis-a-vis management that underpinned this autonomy. A key factor was the ability of the Bemrose chapels to achieve wage increases and day-to-day working arrangements through their own bargaining efforts - superior to those negotiated elsewhere in Liverpool and across the country through the involvement of local or national full-time officials. Nowhere was this more evident than in the manning controls carved out by the SOGAT chapel committee in Bemrose during the 1970s. Frank O'Donoghue related:

The chapel deliberately kept everybody at arms length because we had better agreements than anybody else. We didn't want anything to do with some of the agreements that had been made at other firms. The branch officers very rarely got involved.

At one stage they only attended the place about once in two years.

Not suprisingly, the local SOGAT branch full-time official felt his traditional function and authority undermined by such independent chapel organisation and even national SOGAT officials had to adopt a cautious hands-off approach to the Bemrose chapel, as Jimmy Wilson explained:

If we got to a point where we couldn't reach agreement with management we would call in not the branch, but the national officers. Their attitude towards the chapel was that nothing could satisfy the chapel. None of them wanted to deal with us. In the end though they gave a national officer called Jimmy Pointing the job of signing agreements with the company. It turned out that that suited the chapel, because Jimmy Pointing took the attitude that if the chapel were prepared to do most of the negotiating themselves and honour the agreements, he went along with it.

A vivid example of the powerful autonomy exercised by the SOGAT chapel occured during the mid-1970s with the signing of a House Agreement containing a disputed clause on pensions. Jimmy Wilson takes up the story:

On two occasions when the company had threatened to close the place down the branch secretary came in, and I refused to endorse the agreement, refused to sign it. We didn't feel it had come up to the aspirations that we felt the company should be giving the members. While we could improve the day-to-day conditions in the factory we had great difficulty improving pension rights. They gave us so many hours and said if we didn't sign it they were closing the place down. The branch secretary signed the agreement but the chairman of the company, Bruce Matthews, said he wasn't interested in his signature, he wanted the FoC's signature - who was on the premises on a daily basis and would make the agreement work. That sort of thing never helped the relationship with the branch.

On the other hand, not all the chapels had such an antagonistic relationship with full-time union officials. Certainly, the SLADE chapel enjoyed a much closer partnership, although this was partly due to the fact that the union was a relatively small organisation whose very existence was under threat from new technology. The NGA chapel also had a less abrasive relationship, although at local level this was partly explained by the fact that the local official, Ray Williams, was a 'Militant' supporter who was very sympathetic to chapel concerns. But even in SOGAT the notion of a blanket chapel autonomy would be misplaced. Local and national officials were involved in House Agreement negotiations, if only in an advisory capacity. Moreover, whilst all plant based claims were formulated and negotiated by individual chapels, all draft agreements were

required to be submitted to the branch committees for ratification. The vetting of chapel draft agreements by branches could lead to the amending or even rejection of certain items.

Chapels were also integrated into union affairs through their participation in the quarterly branch meetings and through representation on the branch committees of their respective unions. For example, the SOGAT chapel were entitled to send one delegate per 25 members to union branch meetings. As one of the largest chapels in the branch - with about 750 members - that meant they were allowed about 33 delegates. The chapel ensured its full quota was represented by the method of a rota system of volunteers, usually consisting of committee representatives, ex-committee reps and other union activists. Not surprisingly, the chapel's power base gave it considerable weight to influence the outcome of decision-making within the branch, both through force of argument and through its bloc vote. The chapel was also entitled to 2 representatives on the union's branch committee. From 1978-82 the branch president's position was held by the Bemrose chapel FoC, Jimmy Wilson. Inevitably, a considerable amount of Jimmy Wilson's time was taken up with branch affairs, for example attending officers' meetings, held each Monday for the whole day at the union's offices, and visiting other union members in the Liverpool area (although an important distinction should be drawn between lay branch officers and full-time branch officials).

If the relationship between the Bemrose chapels and their union branches and full-time officials was characterised by both autonomy and integration, independence and dependence, the balance between these contradictory elements did not remain static, particularly within the SOGAT

chapel. As has already been noted, there was a constant source of friction over the level of manning established in the Bemrose plant by the SOGAT chapel, which in the 1970s increased from 620 to over 700 and proved to be a source of some embarrassment to local and national union officials, as Frank O'Donoghue explained:

In the '70s there was no way we would entertain anything such as making one person redundant or de-manning exercises. In fact we were going round the country against the wishes of the national union trying to organise to bring about a common policy in the union for national manning, which the union fought against.

Another contentious issue was the 32 hour week, which had been established on the night shift at Bemrose in 1977 by the chapel committees. Jimmy Wilson recalled:

We assured the company that as far as we were concerned we would go out to the four corners of the country and shout it out that we had achieved the 32 hour week without loss of pay, with increased production to give them the opportunity to bring more work in. But obviously no way did the general secretary Bill Keys and the national executive council want to achieve the 32 hour week by the people of Liverpool.

The gulf between the SOGAT chapel and full-time officials led to the formation of unofficial FoC Fellowships inside the union, both within the Liverpool branch and within the national gravure industry, operating as 'Broad Left' groupings with the aim of influencing union policy decisions and replacing right-wing officials with left-wingers. Although the Communist Party was the key political force behind the FoC Fellowships it pulled together a much wider, if relatively small, network of Left activists. The chairman of the Merseyside FoC Fellowship was Jimmy Wilson:

We used to get FoCs from different plants across Merseyside and exchange agreements - it was a sort of educational for the FoCs. The branch officers wanted us to do everything through the auspices of the branch itself. Their idea was that they would exchange agreements because they were there to do a job and they would do it on behalf of the members. But quite clearly some of the terms and conditions some of them were working under were appalling, and because of the attendance at the FoC Fellowships we did see one or two factories get involved in disputes which got the support of the Fellowship, and we did enhance the standard of living of many of the chapels who came along to the Fellowship.

Although only about 20-30 activists attended the Merseyside FoC Fellowship it was quite an influential force within the local union branch. Yet under the strain of constant attacks and threats of

disciplinary action by local and national union officials alike the Fellowship tended to disband after eighteen months to two years, only to re-group again at a later date.

We had three or four attempts to set up local or national Fellowships but every attempt was made to stop us, each time we were thwarted by national and local officers who saw it as a threat. The branch used to use the argument that it was only a platform for Bemrose, that Bemrose was only looking after themselves. Even before my time they turned the whole of the branch against Bemrose on the basis of the conditions that had been achieved. The conditions hadn't been achieved by the branch or national officers doing the negotiating. So there was always some resentment. And the national union would charge us under rule if we were going to meet the other gravure factories Odhams Sun and Purnells. You were subject to disciplinary action if they found you were meeting.

After 1978 the Bemrose SOGAT chapel became virtually completely estranged from the Merseyside branch following the election of a new full-time branch secretary, Arnie Martin (who beat Jimmy Wilson in the ballot). Frank O'Donoghue explained:

Relations with the branch were never very happy once Martin became branch secretary basically because he wasn't happy with the control we had over our own destiny. He wanted to be able

to get in there and be seen to be a branch secretary and we deliberately kept him at arms length. Only under sufferance would we have him on the premises. The attitude of the officials was one of anti-Militant, reds under the bed, and anybody who doesn't agree with their type of philosophy must be in Militant. They were only really concerned with their own positions and how to further their own interests.

Steve Hewes confirmed the antagonistic relationship that existed between the SOGAT chapel and union branch:

Arnie Martin always seen Jimmy as a threat. The Bemrose chapel were always a law unto themselves. They were so well protected by each other at the chapel and through the leadership that it was like a spinning top - the branch wouldn't go near it because they knew they would be deflected right away. The chapel was where Jimmy got his support within the branch. He used the structures within Bemrose to perpetuate his aspirations within the branch to get policy passed.

During the early 1980s there was a constant battle for control waged within the Merseyside SOGAT branch between Jimmy Wilson as branch president and Arnie Martin as branch secretary and a sharp division arose over an attempt by the Bemrose chapel to move a resolution to be sent to the union's biennial delegate conference insisting on the regular re-election of full-time union officials. In order to stamp their authority

the branch committee resorted to organisational measures, for example introducing a rule change that reduced the number of delegates entitled to attend union branch meetings from the Bemrose chapel to a maximum of 20, effectively disenfranchising about 350 members.

*** the 1980s: the officials move in**

During the early 1980s the clash of interests between the chapel committees and full-time officials - particularly within SOGAT - eventually came to a head over the advantageous terms and conditions carved out in Bemrose and the officials' view that the changed economic and political climate necessitated a change of attitude towards manning and flexible working practices to retain the long-term viability of the plant. Jimmy Wilson recalled:

We realised we were coming under pressure from the national union, with attacks against the chapel. They used to say that our ideas were outdated, that we had to come to reality because of the number of people we had on the presses. We had considerable pressure on myself and the chapel. The national union used to treat the number of people we had on the machines as a joke. We used to try to explain to them that in Liverpool it was 9 men to a press and we wanted 9 men to a press because it was 9 people employed instead of unemployed. It was difficult to get that across to say the people in London and

Bristol and the south west where nobody seemed to be unemployed in the print in those areas at the time.

The turn of events during the early 1980s (loss of 'TV Times', Maxwell takeover, Survival Plan, Joint Working Party) greatly increased the role of full-time union officials in the Bemrose plant. Not only did management encourage them to play a more interventionist role but even the chapel committees - involved in constant deliberations with management to make the plant 'efficient' - found themselves becoming more and more reliant on them, even though in the case of SOGAT there was a deep distrust of their intentions. To begin with in 1981 it was the full-time union officials who were instrumental in pressurising the chapels to accept the terms and conditions of the Survival Plan as the price for long term job security. Similarly, in 1982 it was full-time officials who pressurised the NGA machine chapel to end their unofficial strike for parity of craft rates. As Bob Henderson related:

We ended up with a meeting with Tony Dubbins [general secretary] and Les Dixon [general president] from the union. It was a shouting match with them saying 'If you don't go back to work they'll close the place'. They refused to make the strike official or get support from the national council. But it was the branch secretary, Ray Williams, who persuaded the membership to go back to work where the national officers' couldn't. The terms of going back were that we would work normally, ending our overtime ban and work-to-rule. They gave

us a commitment to parity with the proviso that it was self-financing, that we had to achieve the productivity.

Full-time union officials also played a key role in overseeing the series of 50 Joint Working Party meetings that subsequently took place between the Federated Chapel and Bemrose management to discuss the phased introduction of parity. When management insisted on an immediate agreement on parity as a pre-condition for taking on the 'Sunday Express' magazine contract in 1983 it was the full-time union officials who instructed the chapel committees to accept management's terms (16). Frank O'Donoghue later wrote up an account of what happened:

It was disclosed by management that they had secured the contract for the printing of the 'Sunday Express' magazine. The unions were told that they must accept the deal put forward on that date and had until 12 noon to do so. The SOGAT and Process FoCs refused to sign anything, saying it was under duress. The deadline was extended, and we were further told that it could mean closure for Bemrose if this contract was not accepted. The deadline was extended more than once, with management claiming they only had 'Heads of Agreement' (meaning in essence that it was not legally binding) and that they needed signed acceptance by the unions before the contract was valid properly. Management then repeated that it could mean closure of the plant in Liverpool. Two FoCs remained adamant that they would not sign, and eventually Messrs Parish (NGA) and Pointing

(SOGAT) National Officers and Messrs Williams (NGA) and Martin (SOGAT) Branch secretaries, signed this document over the heads of both FoCs. The drama however, was not yet done. At a meeting in the plant the following week, local management then insisted that they needed the signatures of each individual FoC on the document. (This had never been deemed necessary before). Again the two FoCs refused to sign the new document, and both branch secretaries implored them to change their minds, as it would mean massive problems for Liverpool if the factory were to close. At around 6.30pm that night the SOGAT FoC called an on-plant emergency Chapel Meeting, and put his position four-square to the members. Only on their instruction did he reluctantly agree to sign the document (the Process NGA FoC having just signed also). The effect of this left a feeling of deep bitterness (17).

In 1984-5 there was a major confrontation between the SOGAT chapel committee and the local full-time branch secretary, Arnie Martin. It centred on Martin's sacking of four women secretaries, who had all worked closely with him in the Merseyside SOGAT offices, after they had made a series of complaints against Martin to the general secretary elect, Brenda Dean concerning alleged financial irregularities. (18) Dean overruled the womens' concern and Martin sacked them for gross misconduct. But under the leadership of Jimmy Wilson the Bemrose SOGAT chapel took the initiative in organising an unofficial branch campaign in defence of the women, refusing to cross their picket line and supporting the call for a

full membership meeting to hear details of the allegations against Arnie Martin. Subsequent 'official' branch meetings were boycotted and an 'unofficial' membership meeting of 2,000 was held with nearly half the Merseyside branch withholding their union subscriptions for a number of months. Frank O'Donoghue recalled:

The girls had a lot of respect. They picketed the building for 12 months in rain, hail and snow, tremendous spirit amongst them. We began to organise not only support from the Bemrose chapel but from a number of other chapels throughout Merseyside, including from as far afield as Bebbington. It was starting to build up, the pressure was tremendous. We actually half filled the Central Hall at one meeting and got signatures of everybody that went in, hundreds. So it wasn't just us, an individual chapel who had a disagreement with Martin, there were a lot of people who felt exactly the same.

Yet the local full-time official, with the backing of the national union, wasted no time in taking retaliatory action. More than 100 union members had their union cards withdrawn for non-payment of subs and Jimmy Wilson, the instigator and figurehead of the campaign to have the women reinstated, was expelled from the branch committee and lost his position as president of the Merseyside branch; eventually he was expelled from SOGAT by the national executive for bringing the union into disrepute and the Bemrose chapel was ordered to elect a new FoC.

Arguably, the campaign against Arnie Martin suffered a number of tactical and political mistakes. Although support for the sacked women was garnered from union branch members there was an emphasis put on looking upwards to other left-wing national full-time union officials to help remove Martin. Moreover, instead of confronting Arnie Martin's right-wing policies where they had the greatest strength, in the workplace against management's offensive, they fought virtually exclusively on the terrain of the branch, which left them much more vulnerable to the union's disciplinary measures. Although in a magnificent gesture of loyalty rank and file chapel members continued to back Jimmy Wilson as FoC the local union branch refused to acknowledge the chapel committee or assist it in any way. As a result, the FoC was effectively neutralised from the point of view of both management and the national union.

Meanwhile, other simultaneous events served to reinforce the weaknesses of the chapel committees' relationship to full-time union officials. In some respects, the NGA Warrington, miners' and Wapping strikes provided the political activists within Bemrose with the opportunity to organise solidarity activity that could have reverberations in terms of resisting their own management's offensive. To an extent this potential was grasped. Barry Caton related:

Most of the politicians were involved in Warrington. We had a constant shuttle laid on three times a day at the end of the shift to take people down to the picket. It was organised and paid through the Federated Chapel. Probably something like 50-60 members went down to the picket.

Again, during the year long miners' strike the chapel committees organised shopfloor solidarity. The NGA '82 process chapel had a £1 weekly levy and contributed about £3,000 to the Lancashire NUM strike fund. The SOGAT chapel also had shopfloor collections and levies. Yet the defeats of both these disputes served to reinforce the 'new realism' of the trade union movement - the view that Thatcherism could not be beaten, the law had to be respected and strikes were both counter-productive and 'out of date'. Unfortunately such attitudes became even more accentuated after Bemrose workers voted against taking solidarity action in support of the print strikers at News International's Wapping plant in 1986.

Only ten weeks after the dispute started did Bill Freeman, a member of SOGAT's national executive committee responsible for co-ordinating support for Wapping, appeal for blacking of all News International work, including printing of the 'SunDay' magazine. It was a cynical manoeuvre by the officials designed to head off strikers' criticism of their handling of the dispute. Instead of organising mass picketing of the Wapping plant or calling for solidarity strike action across Fleet Street at the beginning of the dispute, the print union leaders, including Brenda Dean of SOGAT, insisted the way to fight the world's most powerful media baron was through a public relations campaign. Given that they did absolutely nothing to campaign for effective solidarity action either at Bemrose or elsewhere it was not suprising their belated appeal was turned down by the Bemrose chapel. Undoubtedly, the distrust of national SOGAT officials, particularly from the way they were handling the dispute over Arnie Martin within the Merseyside branch, gave the chapel committee activists little confidence to support their recommendation.

Even a direct appeal by the Wapping strikers was turned down (19). Stan Livingston related:

We had a coachload of pickets up from London on two occasions asking us to get involved by not producing for Murdoch. They said to us 'If you don't come out you will be next'. 'In fact', they said, 'you'll be next anyway'. The FOCs met with them and explained we didn't have the support of the members. We really did believe that if we had got involved at that particular time Murdoch would have closed Bemrose down. They agreed that rather than picket they would lobby our members and put their case. But they were right in the end, we were next on the list.

It is conceivable that if full-time union officials had mounted a campaign to win sympathy action in Bemrose at the very beginning of the Wapping dispute they could have encouraged some token action, such as a one-day strike, that might have been a springboard for further action alongside Fleet Street. Such action would also have had the effect of strengthening chapel resolve vis-a-vis Bemrose management. Tragically, refusing to take action in support of Wapping did not protect the jobs of Bemrose workers. The Wapping dispute ended in February 1987 and 775 redundancies were announced at Bemrose in April 1987. Inevitably, the SOGAT chapel committees' resistance to the redundancies was severely impeded by the stance adopted by local union and national officials. As Barry Caton explained:

SOGAT nationally and at branch level didn't have a reaction to the redundancies. They wouldn't get involved while Jimmy Wilson was still the FoC. Having been expelled from SOGAT the membership said 'He's our FoC and we're sticking with him'. So basically they refused to get involved. 'The principle of one man being your FoC far outweighs those 775 going out the door, when Jimmy Wilson's gone we'll come in'. At the end of the day quite a large number of people, branch officers, national officers in SOGAT were delighted with what went on at Bemrose because we had been an example to them and to a certain extent we'd held them up to ridicule because we created so many jobs. They were busy presiding over job losses while Bemrose had been recruiting people. So when the balloon burst they just sat back and said 'We told you so'. We ended up losing the redundancy issue, we lost the FoC and we came out of it with a divided chapel. Everything that had come out of 20 years had gone.

After the redundancies Jimmy Wilson agreed to resign from the FoC position in order to allow the union branch to represent the chapel membership, many of whom believed further resistance was self-defeating, and the chapel's dependency on the full-time union apparatus became even more marked.

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- (4) Stan Livingston: Working Notes.

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- (5) NGA '82 process chapel committee minutes. 26 May 1981.
 - (6) *ibid*, 25 June 1981.
 - (7) Eric Bemrose Ltd. Survival Plan 1981.
 - (8) Eric Bemrose Ltd. Joint Working Party Agreement. August 1983.
 - (9) *ibid*.
 - (10) Campaign brochure published by Federated Chapel 1987.
 - (11) NGA '82 process chapel committee minutes. 24 November 1988.
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(12) *ibid*, 4 April 1989.

(13) NGA '82 process chapel minutes. 21 April 1989.

(14) Liverpool Echo. 8 June 1990.

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- (15) O'Donoghue, Frank. 1985. 'Industrial Relations As A Social Comment: Eric Bemrose Ltd: Joint Working Party'. Essay for Diploma in Trade Union Studies: Royal Institute Liverpool.

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(16) NGA '82 process chapel minutes. 28 August 1983.

(17) O'Donoghue, Frank. *op, cit*.

(18) New Statesman. 19 April 1985.

(19) NGA '82 process chapel minutes. 21 April 1986.

CHAPTER FOUR: FORD

INTERVIEWEES:

Harry Craig: Production Manager, Trim Assembly, Assembly plant.

John Bohanna: TGWU senior steward and chairman of Body plant shop stewards committee.

Don Daunt: MSF senior steward, Assembly plant.

Frank Drummond: TGWU senior shop steward, Assembly plant.

Gordon Cook: Employee Relations Manager, Body plant.

Ritchie O'Connell: TGWU senior shop steward, Assembly plant.

Eddie Roberts: TGWU Convenor, Assembly Plant (1968-70).

Terry Seagraves: TGWU senior shop steward, Body plant.

Barry Senior: Employee Relations Manager, paint shop, Assembly plant.

Ray Storey: TGWU shop steward, Assembly Plant.

Barry Upham: senior Employee Relations Manager, Body plant.

Peter Warden: TGWU rank and file union member, Body plant.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS:

1969: 3-week national 'penalty clause' strike.

4 Convenors (including 2 from Halewood) admitted to NJNC

1971: 9-week national 'parity' strike.

2-week Halewood strike over John Dillon (1st 'Riot Act').

1975: Procedure Agreement, Work Standards Agreement and Union Membership Agreement.

1976: 2-week Halewood 'trade union representation' strike (2nd 'Riot Act').

1978: NJNC reconstituted - all Ford UK plant Convenors admitted.
9-week national pay strike.

1980: Re-tooling of Halewood and introduction of new technology.

1981: 2-week Halewood strike over discipline code (3rd 'Riot Act').

1983: 4-week Assembly plant strike over Paul Kelly.

1985: 2-week Halewood line-workers re-grading strike.

1988: 2-week national pay strike

1990: 7-week national craftsmens' strike and lay-off of production workers.

1991: 3-day production week.

PLANT CONVENORS:

Body Plant: 1970-73: Les Moore
1973-74: Jimmy Ratigan
1974-75: Eric Cooper
1975-76: Bob Williams
1976-80: Eric Cooper
1980-83: Steve Broadhead
1983- : Peter Moore

Assembly Plant: 1970-87: Billy Maguire
1987- : Ritchie Rollins

CHAPTER FOUR: FORD

INTRODUCTION

The Ford Halewood factory was opened in 1963 when, along with other multinational companies, Ford's were attracted to Merseyside largely as a result of the government's favourable regional policy, the existence of an 'adequate pool of labour' and the lack of an organised workforce. The Ford Motor Company, the third largest company in the world, manufactures, assembles and sells cars in over 100 countries (including the United States, Canada, Brazil, Australia, Mexico, Argentina, South Africa, Germany, Spain and Britain) employing over a quarter of a million people (1). It is the number one US based motor company outside North America and sells more cars in Europe than many European manufacturers. Mass production, economies of scale and internationalisation of production and markets have been the key to Ford's route to power and influence. Despite its spread across the world it remains very much an American company with control of the vast empire firmly held in World Headquarters, Dearborn, Michigan.

The last two decades have seen continuous profits for Ford of Britain, the UK subsidiary, with a record pre-tax profit of £673 million in 1988 and its second best ever profit of £483 million in 1989, although it suffered a pre-tax loss of £274 million in 1990 largely as a

result of declining car sales and its acquisition of Jaguar (2). The Halewood complex now covers 346 acres - equivalent to more than 30 full-sized football pitches - and is Ford's second largest manufacturing centre in Britain, comprising of three plants, the Metal, Stamping and Body plant, the Paint, Trim and Assembly plant and the Transmission plant. Unlike the two other case studies, the plant has not been closed down despite suffering job losses. At its peak during the late 1970s, the plant employed nearly 14,000 workers, although for most of the 1980s it hovered around the 8,000 level. By the early 1990s, with about 6,500 hourly-paid *manual* workers (and 1,000 salaried white collar workers) still on the payroll, Halewood remains the biggest private employer on Merseyside. The Ford Escort - produced at the Halewood plant since 1968 - was Britain's top-selling car during the 1980s.

My focus of attention is concentrated on the production workers in the Body plant and Assembly plant, both housed in one giant building on the Halewood estate. The nature of the work is rather different within the two plants. In the Body plant, employing over 2,000, it is heavy manual labour. Shopfloor workers operate the presses as the sheet steel is stamped to produce panels, which are then spot-welded to form sub-assemblies and finally a rigid body shape. By contrast, the Assembly plant, employing over 3,000, is much more semi-skilled and labour-intensive. The welded bodies are cleaned, primed and painted and thousands of parts are installed, including the interior trim, engine, transmission and wheels. Despite computerisation, welding robots and years of technical innovation, car manufacture at Halewood is still firmly dependent on the line worker -

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with work organised so that each operation is sub-divided into its simplest fastest components. Within both plants there is a basic two-shift pattern with workers on a two-week turn-around, alternating between nights and days - although in the press shop of the Body plant there is a three-shift system. The vast majority of production workers (87 per cent) are members of the Transport and General Workers Union with one TGWU factory branch (6/562) spanning the two major plants.

During the early 1960s at Halewood the day-to-day life of the plant was characterised by one endless battle along the 'frontier of control' over the job; the right of a shop steward to have freedom of access to his members on a section and his right to negotiate with the supervisor over the allocation of work only being established by way of periods of severe conflict and stoppages of work. It was this sectional opposition to work pressure that helped consolidate factory-wide steward organisation and a measure of shopfloor counter-control. Only in the late 1960s did management amend its policy, granting the Convenors and senior stewards full-time status and providing facilities, such as union offices on site. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the formal structure of shop steward organisation remained constant. Huw Beynon's 'Working For Ford' reported that there were 45 members of the Assembly plant shop stewards committee in 1967; 36 were TGWU members and the remainder were members of craft unions representing the various maintenance workers in the plant, including the AEU and EETPU. By the early 1980s, there had been a slight increase in the number of TGWU stewards - up to 44 - despite a gradual reduction in the overall size of the workforce, which included 22 stewards on the day shift and 22 on the night shift. In addition, there were a

handful of craft stewards represented on the committee. Similarly, in the Body plant, although the number of workers employed was reduced from between 5-6,000 workers in the 1970s to about 3,000 in the 1980s the size of the shop stewards' committee remained roughly constant at about 63 members (40 in the TGWU and the remainder in craft unions). Thus, across the two plants there were about 88 TGWU stewards during the period of the 1970s and 80s.

Shop stewards are usually elected through a secret ballot vote on an annual basis - although in some sections it is every two years. Representation is determined by geographical sections that tend to correspond to supervisory areas. For example, in the Assembly plant, each moving line in the final trim area is divided up into three sections or workgroups with about 25 people on each. A shop steward would normally represent a whole line. Although there are wide variations across the two plants the average number of union members in a steward's constituency is about 60. Both plants have their own shop stewards' committees which function and organise semi-autonomously, each meeting on a monthly basis. Formally, they meet together as a site-wide joint shop stewards' committee overseeing both plants only irregularly for annual pay negotiations or to discuss some particular local issue that affects the whole Halewood complex, although informally senior stewards from the two plants are in daily contact. In the Assembly plant, the shop stewards' committee annually elects from its number a Convenor, two deputy Convenors and five other TGWU senior stewards (plus one craft steward) to serve on a Joint Works Committee which meets monthly with the plant and personnel manager and conducts all major negotiations. All JWC members have 100 per cent time off

work. The full-time Convenor remains permanently on the day-shift and is concerned exclusively with negotiations with management. Along with the other JWC members (who follow the shift system of their constituents) they form a group of senior stewards who give advice to other sectional stewards and represent the central workers' leadership in the plant. Exactly the same type of JWC structure exists in the Body plant, although there are a greater number of senior stewards represented.

Basic pay, occupational grading and major conditions of employment are negotiated at a company-wide level through a quarterly meeting of a 70-strong National Joint Negotiating Committee (NJNC) composed of senior British Ford *managers, full-time national union officials* representing the 12 different unions with members in Ford plants across the country, and the 21 plant Convenors. With the rate for the job agreed at national level, day-to-day conflict on the shopfloor invariably revolves around questions of job control, such as the speed of the line, movement of labour and discipline (although pay strikes related to the national bargaining forum are also a feature of shopfloor relations). The tasks and responsibilities of shop stewards (and the JWCs) are carefully defined in Ford's 'Blue Book', the handbook of official rules and procedures that govern the relationship between the unions and company, including an elaborate 5-stage grievance procedure aimed at reducing the level of conflict in the plants.

I was granted permission to visit the Halewood complex on two separate occasions and provided with a full-length guided tour of the shopfloor, enabling me to conduct interviews with key senior shop stewards

and - unlike the two previous case studies - with managers, from both the Body and Assembly plants. Nonetheless, the vast majority of my empirical material was collected outside working hours through informal in-depth interviews with contacts that were established and followed up by visiting individuals in their homes. This rich source of data has been supplemented by secondary material, much more of which was available than for the two previous case studies, particularly in relation to managerial strategy. My research is greatly indebted to the pioneering study of the dynamics of workers' organisation, struggle and consciousness in the Ford Halewood plant conducted during the late 1960s by Huw Beynon (1984) and draws substantially on the analytical and methodological approach adopted in Beynon's earlier study. Nonetheless, I have also attempted to make a significant original contribution to an understanding of the contrasting shopfloor developments within the Body and Assembly plants over the last 20 years. Firstly, I have sought to provide a much more detailed account of the underlying processes and key events that occurred during the mid-late 1970s, the period that immediately followed the era described in the first edition of Beynon's book (1973) and which is only briefly commented upon in his second edition (1984), and in documenting the most recent events of the late 1980s and early 1990s I have attempted to extend the account beyond even Beynon's updated edition, providing a useful basis from which to place contemporary trends within their historical context.

Secondly, whilst Beynon discussed some of the dilemmas in the stewards' experience and activity both in relation with members and management, and on occasion developed a critical appraisal of the limitations of their views, he chose a methodological device that utilised

the shop stewards' organisation and consciousness as a 'prism' through which the broader dynamic of class relations could be focussed and understood, which significantly, provided the basis for the close analytical symmetry between Beynon's own account and the perspectives of the stewards. By contrast, I have attempted to stand far more independently removed from the senior stewards' vantage point and to consider the underlying interests of rank and file members. Thirdly, unlike the 'more or less continuous non-participant observation' underpinning Beynon's research method, which tended to short-circuit an explicit theoretical analysis of the complex relationship between structure and consciousness which he documented (Elger, 1986), I have endeavoured to draw out the wider analytical implications of my empirical material more explicitly, for example in terms of the relationship between the volatile nature of rank and file sectional activity and the coherence of the stewards' strategic perspective (providing some comparative theoretical and practical conclusions in Chapter Five).

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1970s

*** the 1970s: the stewards' strengths**

The early 1960s inside the Ford Halewood plant were characterised as being the years of the 'ball and chain' approach by Beynon (1984). Production line managers took a 'no nonsense' approach which had been tried at Dagenham in the 1940s and 50s and was taken to the new Halewood plant when it opened in 1963; it involved a very heavy-handed management strategy aimed at preventing any effective shopfloor trade union organisation able to bargain over conditions of work. Eddie Roberts was a shop steward in the paint shop and one of the most prominent figures in the emerging stewards' organisation, becoming Convenor of the Assembly plant between 1968-70 before leaving the factory to take up a TGWU full-time officer's position. Although a militant shopfloor activist he was not a member of any political party. He offered a vivid description of the plant in its early years:

It was a fucking hell-camp, total liberty taking. People were spoken to like fucking dogs. You'd get Cockney supervisors coming down saying things like 'You fucking lazy scouse twats'. It was a totally autocratic management style...The turnover was massive - they just walked through the place. As people poured

into the factory one end you could see them going out the other end, sacked or under their own steam.

Spontaneous and militant rank and file workers' resistance to managerial intransigence during the 1960s provided the steam on which the engine of a powerful shop steward organisation could be driven. The right of shop stewards to have freedom of access to their members or to negotiate with the supervisor was only established through bouts of severe conflict that sought to carve out a 'frontier of control' over the job. The plant was constantly hit by sectional and plant-wide stoppages of work over issues such as the speed of the production line, movement of labour and discipline. It was through such battles that individual stewards 'cut their teeth' and a powerful plant-wide collective stewards' organisation began to take shape. Both Frank Drummond and Ritchie O'Connell started working as line-workers in the Assembly plant at Halewood in 1967 and have been long-standing trade union activists in the plant over the past 20 years; they are now both senior stewards and 'mainstream' Labour Party supporters. Frank Drummond related what the 'ball and chain' strategy meant:

It was an unbelievable atmosphere. You were insulted all the time and expected to kow-tow. Numerous stoppages occurred because stewards weren't made available for people - because it was at the whim of the supervisor whether they were released or not. So the only way the steward could get to meet his members was to call a strike.

It was this management 'ball and chain' approach which precipitated the 'penalty clause' strike of 1969. Against the backcloth of a Royal Commission and White Paper from the Labour government advocating control of the activities of shop stewards, Ford's annual pay package for its British workforce contained a series of penalty clauses aimed at penalising unofficial stoppages of work. Ritchie O'Connell remembered:

The 1969 strike was tied into the Labour government's 'In Place Of Strife' which proposed legal fines for 'unconstitutional action'. The Ford Motor Company - anticipating things as they always do - tried to impose it before it had become a reality nationally.

Militant shopfloor opposition to the 'penalty clauses' was spearheaded by the shop stewards at Ford's Halewood plant. As Eddie Roberts commented:

A number of us recognised the role and significance within Ford's that what they were doing today would set an industrial relations trend elsewhere tomorrow. The eyes of other car workers right across the engineering industry were going to be looking at Fords. So some of us accepted we had a wider responsibility and others outside were encouraging Ford workers to have a go.

Initiated by shop stewards at Halewood and Swansea in defiance of national union officials on the NJNC (which at that time excluded rank and file representation) the first ever national strike across all Ford's British plants lasted 3 weeks and succeeded in substantially watering down the company's conditions. The democratic reform of the union's negotiating forum followed in the wake of the 1969 strike and the victory over the company at national level boosted the confidence and willingness of rank and file workers and their stewards to resist managerial prerogative at local level, inside Ford's Halewood plant. Halewood stewards led numerous sectional disputes over 'speed-up' on the lines, work standards, manning and the 'blue-eyed system' - the favouritism practised by supervisors in allocating work or in moving men from one job to another. The wave of strikes, many of them unofficial, reflected the 'upturn' in workers' struggles that was taking place more generally inside the British labour movement. In 1971 the Halewood stewards' activities reached a new height during the 9-week national 'parity' pay strike which, although ending ignominiously after the intervention of full-time officials, successfully won comparable earnings with the hitherto better-paid piece-work car factories of the Midlands. Again, it was the Halewood stewards' organisation that provided the backbone of the strike leadership nationally.

Within days of a resumption of work Halewood management attempted to regain the initiative by announcing that workplace industrial relations would be 'played by the Blue Book' with shop stewards being given a full 60-minute work allocation and not allowed off the job without prior permission of the supervisor. The result of this '1st Riot Act' - as it

subsequently became colloquially known - was a series of disciplinary measures and suspensions against shop stewards which led to constant stoppages of work for a period of 10 weeks, finally culminating in the sacking of John Dillon, a steward in the Assembly plant. Ritchie O'Connell related:

After the '71 strike the Company thought they had beaten us into submission. We hadn't had a full week's wage packet for about 20 weeks. They thought this is the time to go in and kick them, when they're down. It was a sustained attack on the shop steward organisation but we were strong enough to come through it.

The Assembly plant took all-out strike action and after 2 weeks forced management to reinstate the sacked steward, although in a different job and without recognition as a union representative. But even if it was not a complete victory it successfully blocked the attempt to destroy the shop stewards' authority.

By the early 1970s, the balance of bargaining power inside the Merseyside plant was undoubtedly weighted to the relative advantage of shopfloor workers. A similar picture existed in many other Ford plants across the country and as Sander Meredeen, a one-time Ford manager at the company's British headquarters in Warley, put it: 'The company realised that it had to come to terms with this "challenge from below"' (Friedman and Meredeen, 1980. p229). At Halewood, management responded by abandoning its 'ball and chain' approach in favour of a

combination of strategies, which can be characterised as the 'carrot and stick' approach. My typology of management strategy differs slightly from Beynon's at this point. Whilst acknowledging the very real initiatives aimed at 'accommodating' to the strength of shop steward organisation taken at senior Ford executive level, I believe Beynon does not adequately describe the contradictory but simultaneous policy of 'conflict' evidenced at plant level inside Halewood. The coherence of Ford's national strategic initiatives stood in sharp contrast to Halewood management's insistence on unilateral managerial control. It was a contradiction rooted in a fundamental inability to devise a successful policy for curbing shopfloor militancy.

On the one hand, there was the 'carrot' component - which involved a policy of accommodation to and incorporation of trade union representatives. For over 20 years Ford had operated a strongly unified and centrally controlled organisational structure within its UK plants with the power of policy-making concentrated at the centre and closely prescribed limits on the autonomy of local line management. That traditional policy and collective bargaining structure now began to change as the company took a series of initiatives, both nationally and in the plants, designed to make a significant contribution towards reducing the number of shopfloor disputes. The first fruit of this accommodation policy was the admission of 4 plant Convenors (including two from Halewood) to the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (NJNC) (Friedman and Meredeen, 1980. p264).

Ironically, the 1969 strike had revealed in sharp relief the inability of remote national full-time union officials to carry their members, support for new agreements. This failure persuaded senior Ford

executives of the need to 'work with the newly selected leaders of the trade union side to develop a more businesslike and trusting relationship' (Friedman and Meredeen, 1980. p226). The preservation of the NJNC as an authoritative joint union-management bargaining forum was regarded as the company's top priority and Ford therefore welcomed the arrival of the plant Convenors on the NJNC, recognising the changed locus of power and the need to reach agreements in future with shopfloor union leaders. Over the next decade the NJNC was reconstituted and democratised even further, leading in 1978 to the admission of all Ford's 21 plant Convenors. Thus, the 2 Halewood plant Convenors became much more closely linked to the formal trade union machine and exposed to the dangers of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation. The attempt to accommodate to the presence of the shop stewards was also reflected in a national 'Procedure Agreement' signed in 1975 which aimed at providing a more effective role for stewards by requiring that in future most problems would be settled at plant level without the need to refer matters to the NJNC for resolution. Simultaneously, the first ever 'Work Standards Agreement' was negotiated which provided a 5-stage procedure through which grievances could be resolved; a status quo clause was conceded in return for an agreement by the unions to take no industrial action over proposed changes to 'well established working practices' during a 15-day period. This was followed by a union membership clause in 1976 which conferred exclusive bargaining rights to the NJNC unions, with provision for a 100 per cent post-entry closed shop and the collection of union dues by deduction from wages through the payroll.

Inside the Halewood plant, Ford's accommodation policy led to the Convenors and senior stewards in both Body and Assembly plants (numbering about 15 individuals) being given greatly enhanced recognition and status, as well as 100 per cent time-off work to conduct union business. If during the 1960s workers had struggled for the right of their shop steward to be released from the line to negotiate, by the 1970s Halewood management adopted a generally more relaxed, if unevenly applied, policy. A new layer of senior shop stewards began to emerge who were generally allocated light duties, allowed a degree of freedom of movement within the plant and regular access to the Convenor's office. In the event of a serious dispute emerging on the section the operation of Ford's new industrial relations policy meant the almost immediate involvement of senior stewards. John Bohanna, a steward for over 20 years, chairman of the shop stewards committee in the Body plant and an independent socialist militant, related:

There were that many stoppages of work that Ford did everything to utilise the senior stewards as policemen of discontent. Consequently they were not on the job. They had to give them facility time to help them solve disputes. But the company blew hot and cold on this issue. When they wanted to use the shop stewards to settle disputes, to exercise a restraining influence on shopfloor militancy, it suited them to allow even some sectional stewards virtually 100 per cent facility time. But if they thought the stewards were abusing their authority

and leading opposition they would quickly put them back on the job.

Therefore, on the one hand, the decade after 1968 saw the Ford Motor Company opt for a strategy of accommodation and integration of the Convenors and senior shop stewards within the Halewood plant. This was the 'carrot' part of the approach. On the other hand, the Halewood plant management simultaneously pursued a strategy of tight shopfloor discipline with the aim of securing high and continuous production. This was the 'stick' component of the approach. It was an element which was clearly the more dominant of the two as far as the shop stewards were concerned. Certainly, management repeatedly took a confrontational approach to workplace industrial relations, for example operating a policy of laying workers off whenever the consequential effects of 'unconstitutional' stoppages of work by one section prevented another from doing their normal jobs. Barry Upham, a senior Employee Relations manager in the Body plant, outlined management's predicament:

As a production superintendent on the night shift, whenever a problem occurred the steward's answer, more often than not, would be 'well, give us another man on the line'. And with the only alternative being a stoppage of work you would bang a man in. That was fine on a temporary basis but once you'd put him in you'd couldn't get him out. Because of that we were heavily overmanned. A lot of supervisors felt demoralised because they had lost control, they knew they had lost control of the

situation because every time they went in on an issue to get a change of some sort they were met with resistance or blackmail. So the place was running amok and the labour and the stewards were controlling it more than the management. It got so bad that locally the management said 'If we go on like this we'll go under, we'll have to try something different'.

In 1976, frustrated with its lack of authority, management wielded the 'big stick' with tremendous ferocity. A new management team - mainly Industrial Relations managers from Dagenham - were drafted into the Halewood plant. The measures they took to 'regain' control of the shopfloor became known as the '2nd Riot Act'. Until this time sectional stewards had negotiated with supervisors. But now the whole relationship changed as the new IR managers started to go down on the shopfloor and, acting over the heads of front-line supervision, 'put the boot in' by insisting on adherence to the 'Blue Book' with no form of appeals procedure. Barry Upham justified the approach thus:

It was simply an intention on management's part to stand up to the issues and not run away from them, to take them on. We had to lose volume to restore control. So the shopfloor was flooded with Personnel Offices. Whenever there was an issue where somebody refused a request from a supervisor we introduced an 'off-pay situation'. But of course, when we took one guy off-pay the rest of his mates on the section went off-pay, went out on strike with him, maybe the whole line went on strike with

him. So a lot of people got laid off. We went through a long period when they were in and out like fiddlers' elbows. Eventually, although it took awhile, some sort of confidence began to build up within the supervision again and we went into a quieter period where we were more in control than we had been. It wasn't perfect but it was better than it had been.

The '2nd Riot Act' lasted for a few months and produced numerous stoppages. As John Bohanna explained:

It was a bit like Germany in the 1930s. The IR were the 'Gestapo' and the production management the 'Weimar'. The position of the shop stewards was completely undermined. We felt the value of trade union representation in Halewood meant nothing to management.

Eventually the issue blew up into a 2-week plant-wide 'representation strike' initiated by the Halewood shop stewards in defence of basic workplace trade union organisation, which was only called off after senior Ford UK executives and national union officials agreed on a new appeals procedure on discipline. But the 'big stick' component of Halewood management's strategy was a continuing feature during the late 1970s. Barry Senior, Employee Relations Manager of the paint shop in the Assembly plant, arrived at Halewood in 1977. As a young graduate he well remembered the old-style bombastic Ford manager:

In many respects it was macho-style management in the 1970s. The view was that shop stewards were gob-shites. They were not to be consulted. Management had the right to manage and you were a wimp if you made any conciliatory gesture to the trade unions. Senior management and supervision took the view that the only thing people responded to was the 'big stick'; the only way to manage the moving line was like the slave galleys, they had to be flogged into it. Everything was confrontational and the stewards responded to that. We had a lot of disputes because we were too precipitate in our action.

Barry Upham also acknowledged that heavy-handed management was directly responsible for provoking much shopfloor militancy:

This company has always been dominated by numbers, the number of cars you produce, the cost of it, the numbers employed. It's always been a numbers' game. And there's always been a pressure on volume production. The managers in the 70s were obviously under pressure from their bosses higher up the tree to turn the volume out and if there was a risk that they wouldn't get it they would resort to whatever measure they could to achieve it. A lot of them were tough, extremely autocratic and dictatorial. It wasn't so much the consultation or negotiation so much as 'We're telling you that's what it's going to be'. And then you got the confrontation.

As far as Halewood management was concerned both the 'carrot' and the 'stick', confrontation and accommodation strategies, were designed with the same objective: to break down the principal source of resistance to managerial authority, namely the shopfloor organisation based around the stewards in both Body and Assembly plants. Clearly it was the 'stick' component of their strategy which predominated during the 1970s, although the impact of the 'carrot' component was more insidious. Yet it met with only limited success. There were dozens of sectional walk-outs in both plants on the Halewood estate during the 1970s. Despite the sometimes dampening impact of senior stewards on workplace militancy, it is clear that quite powerful and independent shop steward organisations developed, that were a constant thorn in the side of the Halewood management. Indeed, the autumn of 1978 saw another 9-week national Ford strike (involving both Merseyside plants) that successfully broke through the Labour government's 5 per cent pay norm to win a 17 per cent increase, reflecting the confidence of shopfloor organisation.

By 1980 a number of quite fundamental changes in several of the work processes at Halewood took place as the plant went through a re-tooling programme in preparation for the launch of a new model, the Escort Mark III. Ford's £205 million investment heralded the age of new technology in the plant. The new automated machinery was concentrated in the Body plant (and in the paint-spraying area of the Assembly plant) where 39 robots were installed - more than in any other car assembly plant in Britain. The Body plant was completely gutted and modernised as lines were thrown out and entirely different jobs introduced. As the Body plant became more capital-intensive the Assembly plant became relatively more labour-

intensive and both shop steward organisations became pre-occupied with the movement of labour, as about 800 workers were either temporarily or permanently transferred from the Body to the Assembly plant. Management initially operated very cautiously; not sure how the new robots would function and with a new model about to be launched they did not want to provoke any conflict which might threaten production schedules. Nonetheless, numerous stoppages took place because so many jobs were disrupted and long cherished customs and practices undermined.

In November 1980 a letter to all its British employees from Ford's referred to the 'appalling situation in the plants' with unconstitutional stoppages continuing unabated. The Halewood plant had long been seen by Ford as its problem plant in the UK. The company's own figures show the plant accounted for a disproportionate amount of UK hours and sales losses between 1978 and 1982 (Marsden et al. 1985. p128). New disciplinary procedures to raise the penalties for 'unconstitutional action' in 1979, a new work standards procedure in 1980, and the suspension of workers who could not meet new production targets in 1981 all provoked sectional walk-outs. As a consequence there were repeated lay-offs in both the Body and Assembly plants. Disputes in 1981 and 1982 gave Halewood shares of 14.6 per cent and 12.6 per cent of the British car industry's working days lost (Marsden et al. 1985. p130). By 1981 the plant's new technology had led to a reduction of labour of 6.2 per cent, with many hundreds of voluntary redundancies. But management still found that shopfloor practices were difficult to reform.

The threat of foreign competition within Ford's core American and European markets - particularly from Japanese car

manufacturers - made the task of reorganisation more urgent. In the late 1970s there was a falling demand for British cars and a deep commercial crisis as the car industry began to suffer chronic overcapacity on a world scale. In 1981 Ford Europe's senior executive Bill Hayden visited Japan and later, in a detailed internal document, he wrote of the ability of the Japanese producers to undercut Ford's most efficient operation in Europe by 30 per cent. It was a devastating document and set the tone for the decade. It was against this background that Ford coined a new calendar, called 'AJ' - 'After Japan' to counteract the competition (Beynon, 1984). Ford's initial response to the threat of Japanese competition was to push through rationalisation and efficiency measures by traditional top-down methods and in 1981 Halewood management reverted to the 'big stick' again by imposing Ford's new disciplinary code, known within the plant as 'Double Dosing' or the 3rd 'Riot Act'. It stipulated that if an employee had a grievance he was to be given 10 minutes off the line to talk to a supervisor and steward. If the problem had not been resolved during this period and he refused to get back on the job he was suspended for the rest of the day. If the shop steward organised a stoppage in his defence the section involved were immediately suspended for the following day's shift. Gordon Cook, an Employee Relations manager in the Body plant at Halewood, explained:

It was called 'Double Dosing'. Once we decided to take somebody off-pay and the rest of the section went on strike for the rest of the shift we suspended them for an equivalent amount of time. So any one-day strike became two days. It was like cutting off our noses to spite our faces but it was another way

of making it more painful for the employees to take strike action because it hurt people more financially.

Inevitably, the policy meant large numbers of workers found themselves being laid off even though they had not been involved in any dispute, causing tremendous anger amongst both stewards and members. John Bohanna recalled the shopfloor response in the Body plant:

The Convenor, Steve Broadhead, and stewards took a hard line position in response to 'Double Dosing'. As soon as the company suspended anyone we reversed it and gave the company 10 minutes to take it back or we threatened a plant-wide stoppage. We took the position 'One's off pay, we're all off pay'. A lot of supervisors backed down. But eventually it blew up at the same time in both plants...we ended up recommending an all-out strike at mass meetings of the members.

After another 2-week strike across the two Halewood plants Ford's were forced to withdraw their (iniquitous) disciplinary code. Placed within the context of the general employers' offensive taking place within British manufacturing industry during the early 1980s the strike was a significant victory for the Halewood shop stewards.

*** the 1970s: the stewards' weaknesses**

The shop stewards inside both Body and Assembly plants during the 1960s and 70s succeeded in building powerful workplace trade union organisations, able to encroach on managerial prerogatives in many important respects. It was the day-to-day struggle on the shopfloor that shaped the type of militant steward organisation that developed, able to establish a degree of shopfloor control over manning, line speeds and the allocation of work. Stewards administered overtime rotas and monitored the movement of labour, strictly controlled through a 'seniority system' based on the length of service of individual workers. Management's authoritarian supervision of work and disciplinary procedures faced constant challenge. As John Bohanna explained:

In the '70s the role of the supervisor was being challenged every day, every hour, because people were confident. It was being challenged more by the workers themselves - it wasn't necessarily an organised co-ordinated action by the shop stewards. But the leadership was responsible for being seen to have the dominant role over who mans what job, who gets graded and that...We were winning jobs all the time. If we didn't have another man immediately we'd stop work and get another man. Once we had another man we were going to keep him on the section and if they tried to take him out we'd have another strike. We actually created hundreds of jobs in the 70s.

Nonetheless, the extent of job controls and the strength of stewards' organisation was by no means uniform across the Halewood site. Some sections of workers, such as the line-workers in the trim and final assembly departments of the Assembly plant and on the 'white lines' inside the Body plant, were able to take advantage of their strategic position in the production process to develop relatively ambitious counter-controls. With many of these jobs being extremely repetitive, monotonous and badly paid (mainly B grade) there was added incentive to engage in shopfloor resistance. Other sections bereft of significant leverage, such as non-line workers on sub-assembly work, forklift drivers and janitors, had less immediate control over the job, and their higher basic pay (mainly C grade), access to greater amounts of overtime and/or generally less onerous work meant they did not as readily engage in militant activity. The uneven level of experience and activity of individual stewards was also a crucial influence on the degree of solidarity and cohesion among rank and file workers in different sections.

Another important factor influencing the balance of bargaining power was the state of the product market. The motor industry is notoriously highly competitive and the dramatic restructuring of car manufacture which took place on a world scale during the 1970s - with imported cars taking an increasing share of the British market - placed even greater pressure on Fords for increased productivity and output. During what was generally a period of market boom, when the shopfloor was working high schedules, it was often not worth it for management to challenge areas of job control, because this carried the risk of a stoppage and lost production. As Barry Upham acknowledged:

In the mid-70s the car industry was booming and we needed every vehicle we could produce and there was a sense that when the market was high and management wanted cars the union felt it was in the ascendancy.

But the product market had its troughs as well as its peaks. During these periods management were not slow to exploit the situation to their advantage, limiting the extent and durability of shopfloor controls. As Eddie Roberts related:

Ford's were quite fickle in their industrial relations strategy. It used to come in waves. You would find that when the order books were full they were quite willing to make concessions all over the place. They would overman sections, they would know people were working the 'welt', having extra tea breaks and so forth. But when there was a bit of a squeeze going on - either because the order books were tighter or there was a model change coming up and they could mark time a bit - they were quite willing to dig their heels in and a lot of disputes would occur. The thing did go in trends.

The combination of objective and subjective factors affecting the balance of bargaining power is highlighted by a comparison of the differences between the two plants on the Halewood estate, not only in terms of management approach but also in the type of shop stewards' committee that developed. Beynon's study concentrated virtually exclusively

on the Assembly plant. Yet arguably, during the 1970s the relative importance of the Body plant was considerably enhanced. Although there was considerable overlap in terms of the level of shopfloor militancy - with both plants being in the forefront at different periods of time - the Body plant stewards' committee was probably a more unpredictable thorn in the side of management than the Assembly plant stewards organisation.

To begin with, the nature of the work process was more physically demanding and dangerous in the Body plant than in the Assembly plant; this caused far more problems over health and safety and tended to precipitate regular shopfloor disputes over the level of noise, amount of fumes and intensity of heat. Although the highly disciplined organisation of work in the Assembly plant proved to be a constant source of conflict, the considerable changes to the Body plant's production system, particularly with the introduction of giant presses and new machinery in the late 1970s and early 1980s, created even greater pressures for shopfloor resistance. Moreover, there appear to have been more persistent hard-line management attempts to impose discipline and control over the pace of work and the level of abstenteeism within the Body plant. Certainly, despite its bouts of set-piece confrontations there was a relatively more co-operative relationship established between management and senior stewards in the Assembly plant, where a larger number of managers than in the Body plant believed in a more consultative approach to workplace industrial relations.

The character of the shop stewards' leadership was also rather different. In the Assembly plant there was a well established 'moderate' Convenor, Billy Maguire, who was in office throughout the 1970s

and was personally very influential in shaping a strong stewards' leadership only prepared to take strike action 'as a last resort'. By contrast, in the Body plant there was a less stable steward leadership with a succession of different Convenors during the 1970s, including a Communist, Les Moore. The Assembly plant stewards also appear to have been more firmly integrated into official trade union structures. The TGWU Halewood factory branch committee was completely dominated by Assembly plant stewards, who despite their preparedness to act unofficially, often tended to operate within official union procedures; there was a co-existence of branch and shopfloor organisation. By contrast, in the Body plant the stewards' committee generally developed more autonomously of the official union machine. In part, this was because TGWU shopfloor organisation inside the Body plant was a much more recent phenomenon than in the Assembly plant; only after the 1969 parity strike did the TGWU become the majority union, following the exodus from the GMB of 2,000 members disgusted at the behaviour of its full-time officials. Even then, until 1973 the Convenor of the Body plant was a member of the AUEW. Furthermore, there were a far greater number of craftsmen in the Body plant than in the Assembly plant, with their own independent power base of union organisation. Indeed, a serious split between the TGWU and craft shop stewards in the Body plant (which led to the formation of a separate craft stewards' committee during 1973-8, not formally recognised by the company or national union officials) meant shopfloor bargaining was invariably more fragmented and less stable than in the Assembly plant. Finally, although there was only ever a handful of politically committed left-wing stewards

in either plant they seemed to wield slightly more influence within the Body plant stewards committee.

At the same time the picture of a relatively militant and powerful shop stewards' organisation in both plants at Halewood has to be qualified by consideration of a number of important limitations. Firstly, it was not the case that both plants were perpetually on strike. In fact, for a great deal of the time rather uneventful bargaining took place that resolved problems without confrontation, even if Ford's constant reassertion of managerial prerogative left little scope for a long-term accommodation between stewards and management. But the application of management's 'carrot and stick' approach clearly had some success. If the 'big stick' approach (often provoking disputes) worked to undermine plant-wide solidarity with its resulting constant lay-offs, the 'carrot' approach, of involving senior stewards in overseeing the formalised agreements, helped to create a more 'professional' basis for workplace trade unionism. For example, the number of stoppages recorded by Ford's (counted as disputes involving 3 or more workers stopping work for 15 minutes or more) although probably underestimating the actual level of conflict in the plants (in terms of the duration of strikes, the numbers of workers involved and their impact on production) does show a gradual decline during the course of the 1970s.

Number of Stoppages in Ford Halewood 1976-1983:

1976: 310
1977: 264
1978: 116
1979: 69
1980: 116
1981: 52
1982: 73
1983: 34 (3)

Secondly, there were a number of sectional divisions handicapping the strength of shop stewards organisation. In the Assembly plant the differentiation between line-workers and non-line workers - over such things as the nature of work, level of supervision, rate of pay and availability of overtime - was a traditional source of animosity. There was also a great deal of resentment among many line-workers towards the women sewing-machinists who worked within the trim manufacture department, partly because although they worked only on day-shifts they were on a higher basic grade than most line-workers and partly because they were viewed as women only working for 'pin-money'. Similarly, in the Body plant, a significant factor undermining shopfloor unity was the differences in job, pay and conditions between the 2-shift and 3-shift sections, with the latter traditionally concerned to maintain its advantageous position. Another division was between TGWU production workers and craftsmen, members of the AUE and EETPU, who often crossed TGWU workers' picket lines.

Thirdly, there was the weakness of what Beynon (1984) described as the stewards' 'factory class-consciousness', a highly developed understanding of the day-to-day conflicts on the shopfloor, but a politics essentially limited to the confines of the factory and not generalised to wider political concerns. As Eddie Roberts, one of the most prominent stewards of the 1960s, recalled:

We didn't have a very heightened political awareness. None of us were active in political parties. We were all accused of being every faction of Trot when the truth was none of us really were. Almost naively in some respects our attitude was conditioned around the shopfloor. We got the trust from the lads and the support on the issues that became the priority. No one was ever able to say we were politically motivated maniacs. Although they tried that they weren't able to prove it.

Significantly, after leaving Halewood in 1970, Eddie Roberts belatedly recognised the need for a political organisation rooted on the shopfloor and joined the Communist Party. A handful of other stewards joined small revolutionary socialist organisations, such as Big Flame and the International Socialists. Others were 'mainstream' members of the Labour Party. Yet by and large, most of the stewards who emerged during the 1970s adopted a quasi-syndicalist approach, concerned only with immediate issues on the shopfloor, with the Halewood stewards' bodies being essentially peripheral to the campaigns and issues taken up within the

local labour movement. Eddie Roberts reflected on the attitude of his successor as Convenor in the Assembly plant during the 1970s:

The Ford stewards didn't integrate themselves within the local labour movement, they bricked themselves in. Billy Maguire was very different from me as a Convenor. I think if my deputy had been elected he would have perpetuated a more progressive regime. Individuals do have an influence, it's a fact. When Billy came in radical newspapers and organisations came along and Billy censured them all, threw them all out. Anyone who wanted to carry a Ford banner who wasn't part of Ford's was excommunicated. He cosseted and protected them from the outside world.

The picture was not very different in the Body plant. No doubt the fact that day-to-day improvements were achieved through shopfloor union organisation encouraged most stewards to believe they could rely on industrial muscle alone. But although this self-sufficiency reflected their sense of strength it also underlined an important limitation which would become ever more apparent during the recession years of the 1980s.

In conclusion, there is little doubt the balance of bargaining power was tilted to the relative advantage of shop steward organisation in the Ford Halewood plant during the 1970s. It was built up in struggle against a management who, despite its limited initiatives aimed at incorporating a layer of senior stewards, worked to undermine the basis of a stable accommodative relationship with the stewards' organisation

through its complimentary and more dominant strategy of 'sticking the boot in'. Despite aspects of co-operation the period was characterised by an extremely conflictual relationship. But this relationship was dramatically altered from the early 1980s onwards.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT: THE 1980s

*** the 1980s: years of co-operation**

The installation of new technology substantially reduced labour requirements and in January 1983 Ford's announced a voluntary redundancy programme with the loss of 3,000 jobs sought over a period of two years. Although the steward committees were opposed in principle to job losses they were not able to alter management's decision. Few people volunteered for redundancy until Assembly plant workers walked out on a 4-week strike in defence of a young line worker, Paul Kelly, sacked for allegedly bending a small bracket in a car. The strike, which immediately led to lay-offs in the Body plant, reflected the more general anger at management's relentless drive for 'efficiency'. But Halewood management took the opportunity of plunging the knife even further by announcing that within eight days of a return to work in the Assembly plant they would implement a series of new working practices in the Body plant, prompting the Body plant shop stewards' committee to recommend indefinite strike action if Ford went ahead with its plans. Eventually, Ford backed down from its hard-line stance. The Assembly plant workforce returned to work after the company agreed to abide by the outcome of an independent tribunal into Paul Kelly's sacking, which finally led to his re-instatement, and although some efficiency based changes were introduced in the Body plant the stewards were able to forestall key aspects of their implementation. It was another illustration that Ford could not just ride rough-shod over shop

steward organisation in Halewood. But there was also a heavy price to pay in terms of loss of jobs as a flood of people, many of them younger workers, decided to take voluntary redundancy and accept the relatively high payments offered by the company. Peter Warden, a rank and file union activist in the Body plant, where he has worked since the late 1970s, remembered:

Quite a few young unmarried men took the redundancy. Some of them were the more militant people, particularly in my area. They felt the most insecure. They had been going through two years with the change in the model, unsure what their job or the future was going to be and when the strike happened over Paul Kelly - we believe the company instigated that because when the redundancies first showed nobody put their name down - when the strike began to bite the people who had the least service and were unsure, they went.

The mid-1980s continued to be dominated by the fear of job loss as shop stewards - confronted with a new dimension to Ford's multinational activity - increasingly began to believe the Halewood plant would be closed if workplace industrial relations were not drastically changed. The company had developed the concept of a European production system around its 'Ford Europe' company, as particular plants became identified with single models; Halewood now only produced the one model, the Escort. At the same time, internationally integrated sourcing meant no longer did a single plant build a single model for its own national market;

the same Escort model assembled at Halewood was also produced in Saarlouis, West Germany, enabling Ford to switch production between plants and to make productivity comparisons between the two with the ultimate threat of closure unless efficiency was improved. In February 1981 the 'Guardian' newspaper carried the headline: 'Ford Plans To Run Down European Plants' and reported that documents leaked from Detroit outlined Ford's plan to switch Escort production to Brazil by 1983 with Ford Europe left to merely supply the components; the European plant most likely to be affected, it stated, was Halewood (4).

But the looming prospect of plant closure was greatly accelerated after the 1983 Paul Kelly strike when Arthur Rothwell, Ford Halewood's Operations Manager, took the highly dramatic step of going down onto the shopfloor, stopping all the production lines and addressing the workforce about the drastic changes needed if closure was to be averted. According to Harry Craig, Production Manager of the Trim in the Assembly plant:

When he had finished no one said anything. There was absolute silence. But the clarion call didn't go out on the Friday and we all changed on the Monday. It took at least a year before attitudes really began to shift.

Throughout 1983-4 a number of presentations were given by management to shop stewards using graphs, charts and a torrent of statistics to illustrate the low level of labour productivity, the overmanning, slow workspace and poor labour relations in the plant that

threatened its future survival. Ford made extensive use of productivity comparisons between their British and continental plants to prove Halewood was the least productive in Europe. According to a newsletter issued to the Halewood workforce in 1983, labour and overhead efficiency in the plant declined by 15 per cent between 1972 and 1978 while the Saarlouis plant in West Germany - which also produces the Escort - underwent continuous improvement of 41 per cent between 1972-82 (Marsden et al. 1985. p26). The constant theme was the need to cut labour, reform shopfloor working practices, break demarcation, introduce wider flexibility, boost productivity and raise quality.

Meanwhile, as will have become clear from the two previous case studies, during the early 1980s economic recession Merseyside became synonymous with plant closures and redundancies. The closure of two massive workplaces in nearby Speke, the Dunlop plant in 1979 - one of the best union organised factories on Merseyside - and the BL Number Two plant - at the height of a prolonged strike over mutuality and manning levels - had a particularly sobering impact on the horizons of many Ford workers. Senior stewards felt they were being taken to the edge of the abyss and shown how deep it really was. As Frank Drummond remarked:

Whether it was true or not the Ford Motor Company constantly said 'Halewood - you're under threat. Your record is bad. You've got an absenteeism problem, a labour relations problem'. So we were under tremendous pressure. We had just had the experience of the British Leyland plant up the road shutting

down and we realised we were in direct competition with Saarlouis if we were going to survive.

The key dilemma for the Halewood stewards, as they saw it, was whether to completely resist change and risk closure of the plant with catastrophic job losses or to acquiesce in certain changes so as to increase the likelihood of survival, even though this would involve a substantial reduction in the size of the workforce and major changes in working practices. They decided on the latter option. Ray Storey has worked on the trim in the Assembly plant for 12 years, serving for 2 years as a shop steward, and is a member of the far-left Socialist Workers Party. He related how the stewards responded:

Management convinced them with the economics of the thing that the plants in Germany and Spain were producing cars more efficiently with less labour and less cost. Management were looking at it from a world viewpoint and Halewood was the least productive. So therefore in terms of long-term investment it made sense to put it where it was most productive instead of Halewood which was prone to strike action. That convinced them that management were looking to running down Halewood if the situation didn't improve.

As a result, the Convenors in both Assembly and Body plants approached the management to pledge they were willing to be part of the 'saving of Halewood'. Steve Broadhead, Convenor in the Body plant,

spoke directly to Bill Hayden, Ford's UK director, to indicate he was prepared to work in line with the company to save jobs for the future. Hayden visited Halewood and spoke directly to the senior stewards, insisting they had to change the strike-bound image of the plant constantly projected in the media. The only way to survive, he argued, was for everybody from the shopfloor to management to realise that 'working together' was the way forward; 'fighting the competition, instead of each other'. As a gesture of intent, Hayden offered a new plastics project in the Body plant costing \$11 million - but only if the shop stewards agreed to abandon their militant 'one out, all-out policy' towards lay-offs. The 'one-out, all-out' had often been invoked in the past when management had laid-off groups of workers who had not participated in, but were nonetheless affected by, stoppages involving other sections of workers. It had resulted in numerous plant-wide shutdowns. But the Body plant Convenor now used his authority and influence to convince the stewards to accept a new selective lay-off agreement. A simultaneous process took place in the Assembly plant, where the Convenor, Billy Maguire, argued that to ensure Halewood did not close the stewards 'would have to do business in a different way'. Ritchie O'Connell explained:

When Billy Maguire approached the company there was a hell of a lot of heart searching amongst the stewards because traditionally and historically we had a point of view towards management that they were not going to exploit our members. So we had to sit down and re-appraise our approach and adjust to the fact that the company were going to make certain demands on

us that were going to be in the long-term interests of the membership. But there was a hell of a lot of heart searching because we had to turn over 20 odd years attitudes and we had to think differently.

A joint presentation was given at a mass meeting in the Assembly plant with Arthur Rothwell and his management team on the platform alongside Billy Maguire and the senior stewards. As Frank Drummond explained:

What we said to the meeting was we don't want to give any fundamental agreements away like progression through seniority (which we'd be prepared to man the barricades for) but we do realise that to make sure this plant is still open in the 1990s the stewards and members have got a different role to play with management. The phrase became 'It's not war-war, its jaw-jaw'.

The change of attitude by the Halewood stewards coincided with important developments in the Ford Motor Company's approach to industrial relations in its British plants (Starkey and McKinlay, 1989). Faced with ever-increasing Japanese competition Ford's stressed its only guarantee of market survival would come from noticeable improvements both in productivity and in the quality of the finished product. However, raising the level of quality was unlikely to succeed with management's traditional adversarial workplace industrial relations approach. So a new labour relations strategy, imported from the United States was adopted,

named 'Employee Involvement' (EI). Unlike the merely structural reforms of internal bargaining institutions that had been implemented during the 1970s 'EI' also emphasised a gradual, processual approach to building a co-operative relationship between management and unions, with the aim of encouraging shopfloor workers to identify with the company's objectives and of harnessing their consent to organisational change. From the mid-1980s onwards Halewood management gradually changed its policy, suspending their confrontational approach in favour of what could be described as a rather sophisticated 'poisoned handshake' approach, aimed at establishing 'strong bargaining relations'. Significantly, two continental managers recently drafted into the Halewood plant, Albert Caspers and Jan Ubachs, had already begun to encourage a constant dialogue with shop stewards, and over the next few years the principles of 'EI' were put into practice in earnest. Frank Drummond recalled the effect this had inside the Assembly plant:

Managers and supervisors started getting involved in actually talking to the stewards. I suppose we began to court each other a little bit. The attitude was 'this strike business is doing us no good, we've got to change the image of Halewood and all pull together. Let's not go back to the '60s and '70s when we had to fight every day'.

As John Bohanna explained, a similar process took place in the Body plant:

The approach to people on the lines by management and supervision became totally different. It didn't happen overnight. But whenever a grievance arose that could potentially lead to a stoppage the company would back-off immediately. The problem would run and people would talk about it. The manager gave the steward the chance to talk to the members on the section. It took the pressure off. The whole atmosphere changed. Management would even go and chat to the lads on the line - 'what's the problem, let's have a working lunch'. The lads would go into the Conference room with IR, the manager and a steward and there'd be pies and tea and sticky buns. They'd get their dinner and they'd get paid for sitting down and having a chat.

Halewood management adopted a variety of methods to encourage both the leadership of the shop stewards' organisation and rank and file workers to identify more closely with the problems confronting the company, and hence accept the inescapability of the policies proposed by management. Firstly, the Convenors' offices in both the Body and Assembly plants were moved off the shopfloor and transferred to the personnel block so they would be directly next to the plant managers' offices. Secondly, many sectional stewards were granted 100 per cent time-off work and the union provided with more extensive facilities such as typing and duplicating provision, and a free supply of paper, pens and office equipment. Thirdly, management held a series of video shows showing the 'state of the company' - of Ford Europe, UK and Halewood - screened first

to the JWC's, then the shop stewards and finally to the workforce, aimed at making them feel more responsible for the success of the company. Fourthly, they introduced 'training programmes' that took workers off the lines in small groups, walking them around the factory to show them how the car was built from beginning to end - always involving the stewards with them. Fifthly, they introduced 'joint action groups' composed of stewards and managers in each area of the plant, meeting informally to discuss volume and come up with agreed solutions to shopfloor problems. Sixthly, they completely transformed all the tea areas, - brightening them up with framed photographs, potted plants, etc - and made a number of improvements to the plant environment - making it better lit and warmer. Seventhly, they organised a major programme of visits to the factory by workers' families to encourage a wider sense of identity with the company.

Perhaps the most distinctive initiative was the financial investment the company made into organising group trips abroad to other Ford factories in Germany, Belgium and Spain. Two or three aircraft flew from Liverpool Airport each week, with different groups of Halewood workers accompanied by managers and shop stewards, on 36-hour round trips. About 500 Halewood workers, with a delegation from every section of the plant, participated in these visits abroad with the objective of encouraging an improvement in the efficiency and productivity of Halewood in line with the continental plants. The advantages to be gained from management's point of view were not lost on Barry Senior:

What they achieved was two-fold: it showed how they did it abroad and it got them into contact - over dinner and a few

drinks - with the managers. It formed relationships - and so there was this forming of a bit of a bond.

Thus, a combination of material and ideological pressures underlined the more cautious approach adopted by most stewards and rank and file workers in the Halewood plant. Apart from the very high local rates of unemployment in Merseyside and the ever apparent threat of closure, the British trade union movement generally during this period was very much on the defensive with the 'new realism' further reinforced by the Tory government's defeat of the 1984-5 national miners' strike. In addition the new co-operative relationship established between stewards and management led to a substantial decline in stoppages of work and ended the constant lay-offs and reduced weekly wage packets that had prevailed in the past. Ray Storey outlined the demonstrable gains felt by many shopfloor workers.

Because of the sectional stoppages people were getting fed up on the shopfloor. You didn't know whether you were going to be laid off from one week to another. So there was unrest about that and that's the way it was sold to the shopfloor. Getting a regular wage packet every week was a sense of security. And there was the feeling your job was safer from redundancy. Discipline over 'welt' working was overlooked to a large extent so people openly flouted that. And people saw that as a gain. Also, they saw management were prepared to talk to them, so there was less aggro, they were prepared to listen and consider problems.

The question arises how far did it represent an active ideological embrace of managerial arguments of 'viability' and 'profitability' and acceptance of the logic of more flexible working practices, as opposed to an organised tactical retreat forced on the stewards because of the precarious situation they found themselves in but with the eventual aim of recouping lost ground in the future? According to John Bohanna, some shop stewards in the Body plant remained sceptical about the company's friendly, outstretched 'poisoned handshake' strategy. They interpreted it as a subtle attempt to incorporate the shopfloor union organisation into management structures but with Ford as the major beneficiary. But Ray Storey contrasted the attitudes of senior stewards with sectional stewards in the Assembly plant:

The senior stewards accepted it hook, line and sinker. But there was tension with some of the sectional stewards who felt the senior stewards were accepting all kinds of things without consulting them. But because they didn't have the counter-arguments to challenge them they were gradually drawn more and more into it. So it gradually seeped down. But I think originally they were dragged into it by the senior stewards and Billy Maguire. When we had stoppages the argument that 'we're all in the same boat and we've all got to work together' came up. So it was gradually absorbed. As the pressure from the shopfloor went away they were pulled more and more to embrace it.

A key problem was the lack of a coherent political alternative from the Left stewards. Despite the differentiation between the Body and Assembly plants and between the sectional stewards and senior stewards it was essentially over the operational detail of the co-operative relationship with management, over the speed of the changes to work organisation rather than any disagreement in principle over the general notions of 'competitiveness' and its inherent logic of change.

Halewood management viewed shop stewards throughout the 1980s as absolutely central to the process of achieving change and winning the co-operation of the shopfloor, as Ray Storey acknowledged:

Management's 'backing-off' is a recognition that by involving the steward in trying to sort out problems, it's delivering the goods. They think if they only spend the time explaining what the changes entail and make the steward feel involved - he'll understand the reasons and accept it.

The invariable rule is to 'talk first, second and last', with disputes frequently settled through the involvement of senior stewards. Terry Seagraves, a shop steward in the Body plant, explained:

Say there is a problem over an increase in line speeds. Before management will let you down onto the floor to say to your members 'right, let's go' they'll sit you down around the table and get the senior steward in, the Convenor, as many people as they can to argue a different line. They don't just allow you

to go down there. They wouldn't increase the line speeds while you're talking - in the old days they would have done that - but they'll talk the dispute out. They say 'we would like to do this' and we say 'But we've got these problems'. So the company will try and address those problems but 75 per cent of the time they get what they want. They're getting an awful lot without conflict.

Not surprisingly, sectional stoppages of work - the springboard of the shop stewards power - declined massively. According to management figures, the number of strikes was reduced from an average of about 75-100 in the late 1970s to about 12 by the late 1980s (5).

Number Of Stoppages In Ford Halewood 1980-1988:

| | |
|-------|--------|
| 1980: | 116 |
| 1981: | 52 |
| 1982: | 73 |
| 1983: | 34 |
| 1984: | 31 |
| 1985: | 12 |
| 1986: | 13 |
| 1987: | 12 |
| 1988: | 17 (6) |

Moreover, there is no doubt Halewood management's more sophisticated approach to industrial relations succeeded in securing acquiescence in substantial increases in productivity and output and changes in working practices. For example, production of cars increased from about 786 vehicles a day in 1982 to 1,100 in 1990 (7). Yet this increase in output was achieved with a simultaneous 40 per cent reduction in the number of jobs, as the workforce was cut by 4,000 during the 1980s (8). Meanwhile, in 1985 Ford made an important breakthrough in securing the agreement of the NJNC to more flexible working practices within its British plants. Although opposed by Halewood shop stewards and rejected in a ballot vote of the membership, a far-reaching 2-year wages and conditions agreement was implemented at local level. It drastically reduced the number of job demarcations and workers were expected to be mobile around the plant, to carry out a wider range of tasks including simple maintenance and housekeeping of their workstations, and to have more responsibility for quality control. As Ray Storey reflected:

Basically, they've got a more pliable, flexible workforce which produces greater output in a shorter period of time and which produces virtually continuously".

Thus, by the late 1980s, the strong and independent shop steward organisation, that had been prepared to give its backing to militant unofficial workplace stoppages a decade earlier, had been considerably weakened as the balance of bargaining power was pushed to management's advantage. A general consequence of this development, which

will be explored later on, is that the more conciliatory 'strong bargaining relationship' established between stewards and management (particularly the senior stewards) tended to routinise workplace trade unionism, demobilise collective rank and file activity and undermine the vitality of steward organisation.

*** the late 1980s/early 1990s: potential and limitations**

Although the shop stewards' power was considerably undermined during the late 1980s this did not mean workplace union organisation was impotent to forestall, influence or change developments. A key factor ensuring the continued existence of shop stewards organisation compelled to defend workers' collective interests was the fundamentally antagonistic relationship that underlay the apparent picture of shopfloor harmony. As Don Daunt, a white collar employee and Manufacturing Science Finance senior steward in the Assembly plant, explained:

Arthur Rothwell, the Operations Manager, is certainly unrecognisable from a few years ago. He was a very aggressive man. It was as if he had a baseball bat in his hand which he would beat you over the head with. Today he jokes that he's still got it in his office, but it's on the wall in a glass case. It's a bit tongue-in-cheek, but it's like a fire-alarm, in case of emergency. That really is the mentality at Ford's. They could change just like that. And we know it.

In fact, there was also a continuing contradiction between Ford's long-term goal of 'Employee Involvement' and the short-term necessity of asserting managerial prerogative. In other words, although the basic relationship of conflict between management and shop stewards was often submerged below the surface it did not disappear. From time to time the 'big stick' or confrontational approach re-emerged in a variety of ways and suggested the shop stewards' organisation was far from becoming completely marginal to managerial concerns. For example, despite periodic attempts, management were still not able to crack the shopfloor control exercised over the movement of labour and manning of jobs based on seniority. This remained a major source of grievance as workers defended a hard-won unofficial 'custom and practice'. Likewise, stewards did not lose control over overtime rotas and successfully defended informally established 'early finish' practices. Equally, the company still faced an incessant challenge to imposed work standards and unilaterally revised timings of jobs and speed-up. In general, there was a mood of shopfloor resentment towards management, although by and large this was not translated into action as rank and file workers rarely had the confidence to take matters into their own hands. But on occasions, the bitterness boiled over into isolated sectional stoppages, for example in October 1989, when a strike on the door-hanging section of the white lines over a health and safety issue laid-off the entire Body plant for two days (for the first time in five years) and forced management to make some concessions. Significantly, half of the strikers were 'new starters', young lads who had only recently been hired. Similarly, in the Assembly plant when 300 night-

shift workers walked out over the introduction of new coiled airlines in November 1990. Ray Storey related:

They wanted to introduce a curly compressed line on the new model as opposed to the straight ones we used to have. There was little difference between the two but people were annoyed management had introduced them without consultation. The section stopped straight away and the senior steward called a meeting. He said there was no real reason management were making the change except they thought they could get away with it but then half heartedly said we should go back to work. He was voted down two to one and we came out for two nights. It ended in compromise with air lines that are part straight, part curly.

Shopfloor resilience was also evident in a 2-week re-grading strike by line-workers in both Body and Assembly plants in 1985. Sporadic sectional stoppages against attacks on work standards coalesced into a bitter explosion of anger at a national 2-year pay deal agreed despite a massive vote of opposition from most UK Ford plants, including a 70 per cent ballot vote rejection at Halewood. As soon as it became apparent that a widely anticipated extra pay allowance for line-workers was not to be forthcoming a spontaneous rank and file revolt forced even the senior stewards to give their blessing to a strike that effectively closed down most of the Halewood operation. Even though the strike eventually fizzled out without success it was an illustration that workplace trade

unionism was still alive and kicking. Resistance was also evident when management tried to introduce 'quality circles' into Halewood in 1985. These 'problem solving' groups - involving meetings of supervision, stewards and the workforce in each section of the plant - were aimed at shifting the general emphasis away from the negotiation of change towards more consultative methods (9). Their successful implementation in the United States encouraged Ford to adopt the experiment within its UK plants and a management consultancy firm, W.P. Dolan and Associates, was brought into the Halewood plant to oversee their introduction (10). Yet with official TGWU support, the stewards successfully blocked the attempt to introduce 'quality circles' in Halewood, as they threatened to bypass the formal channels of shopfloor union representation.

Another example of shopfloor belligerency was provided by the national Ford pay strike of 1988 - the first in over a decade - that was spearheaded by unofficial walk-outs from Halewood in protest at a proposed 3-year agreement that provided for more flexible working practices. Ray Storey related what happened when the company's offer was discussed on the trim lines in the Assembly plant:

We held a meeting on my section. Everyone wanted to do something. The meeting only lasted about 30 seconds. The steward told us the offer; he said 'It's crap' and called a stoppage, and we were out.

Frank Drummond added:

We've not been beaten into submission. Nothing's beaten. It's very, very subtle now and the methods have changed. But the strike proved that Ford mis-read the situation. They really believed the shopfloor would just about accept anything - but they've been proved wrong. The stewards were totally opposed to what the company were asking. We went to mass meetings and had two secret ballots. 87 per cent voted for strike action. The men knew how much they had given the company and how much they had turned it around and they knew what they were being offered was nowhere what they had achieved for the company.

A number of different elements appear to have combined to create a sudden revival of militant struggle within the plant. Firstly, there was the general feeling that Ford workers had taken enough; flexibility and speed-up had led to a worsening of condition and the insult of a new pay deal that 'asked for their souls' but gave little back in return provoked a groundswell of bitterness. Secondly, there was the impact of the limited economic recovery on many workers' attitudes. The fall of unemployment nationally by 550,000 from its peak in 1986 was reflected in Halewood by the ending of the recruitment freeze imposed in 1979 and the taking on of new workers in different sections across the plants. The message that many workers had accepted for years, that any struggle over wages or conditions would threaten jobs, suddenly lost a lot of its credibility. Workers felt a change in the strength of their bargaining power. It was not too surprising therefore, that along with booming company profits and high rates of productivity growth, the decline in unemployment

gave Ford workers both the ability and motivation to ask for more. The strike exposed the vulnerability of Ford's highly integrated European 'just in time' single-sourcing operation, which left virtually no room for alternative production sources or the storage of strategic stocks, resulting in lay-offs at the Genk plant in Belgium. Ford UK executives backed down from their original hard-hitting demands and the revised deal increased pay above the level of inflation, reduced the length of the agreement to 2 years and conceded that new working practices could not be imposed without local plant agreement.

But despite these sparks of resistance it is important to note the limitations to the durability of shop steward organisation inside the Halewood plant. Certainly, the accommodative relationship established between stewards and management continued to be a pervasive feature of developments throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. For example, the 1988 pay strike did not really change the terms of this relationship with Halewood management. It was perceived as being a dispute with the Ford Motor Company nationally, rather than with local Halewood management. It neither upset the co-operative relationship with management nor fed any greater confidence on the shopfloor to use strike action to fight over day-to-day issues. As John Bohanna related:

It was though it was a weekend turn-over. The cosy relationship with management was maintained throughout the strike, in as much as management provided the pickets with a caravan and the stewards allowed certain people to go in and move things around. There was picketing but the senior stewards still went

on discussing things with management as if it was just normal business. Although nothing was being produced the strike didn't interrupt normal relationships.

Another example of this sustained co-operative relationship occurred just before the 3-week plant summer shut-down in 1989. Ford had launched a £600 million 4 year investment programme in Halewood, in preparation for the launch of a new Escort model, and major reconstruction work had begun on re-tooling the plant with the latest new technology and production systems, particularly in the Body plant. But Ford's re-organisation plans were suddenly threatened when the 200 sub-contract electricians fitting the new machinery banned overtime in pursuance of a wage claim with their employers. Unfortunately, TGWU officials and senior stewards jumped to Ford's defence by demanding the electricians call off their dispute to allow the work to proceed. John Bohanna explained:

The attitude of Ritchie Rollins [Convenor in the Assembly plant] was that the electricians were holding us to ransom. Delaying the introduction of the new technology meant we could be laid-off without pay because it would be behind schedule. So it was a threat to T and G workers. He told the electricians they were no more than 'industrial gypsies'. He said they were all right, they move on, but their action would threaten our livelihoods.

Even more damaging was the stance adopted by the Halewood steward committees towards a strike by the plant's 600 AUEW and EETPU skilled maintenance workers in February 1990. Although Ford's TGWU production workers had narrowly voted to accept a new national 2-year pay deal the craftsmen at Halewood (and other plants across the country) walked out on strike in protest at the strings attached to the deal, in the process laying-off both Body and Assembly plants. Many TGWU senior stewards, echoing the arguments from full-time union officials, condemned the strike for being divisive and involving a minority trying to dictate to the majority. Ray Storey recalled:

From the start Ritchie Rollins saw the strike as holding us to ransom. His argument was 'The tail can't wag the dog, that's golden rule number one.'

Such sentiments were backed up by many other stewards who were suspicious of the involvement of the EETPU in the dispute, a union that had been recently expelled from the TUC for its 'business unionism'. Yet in reality, the craftsmen were fighting against strings that would allow Ford to introduce more differentials and changes in working practices that would see them lose skills and jobs. A craftsmen's victory would have benefited all groups of workers in the plant.

By opposing the strike the TGWU stewards only played into the hands of management and the right-wing leaders of the EETPU. When contract workers installing the new technology in the plant refused to cross craftsmen's picket lines during the fifth week of the strike Halewood

management approached the TGWU stewards for help in securing an immediate return to work, threatening further lay-offs if re-equipping of the plant was delayed. Although the TGWU senior stewards held numerous meetings with the craftsmen they were unable to convince them to end the dispute.

Finally, management took the initiative and asked the TGWU to break the strike by crossing picket lines. The stewards' committees in both Body and Assembly plants agreed and called mass meetings to recommend their members to report to work as normal. Their action effectively broke the back of the strike. Ray Storey related:

Some of the stewards even organised a counter-picket to the craftsmen. The craftsmen were saying 'Don't go in' and the T and G were saying 'Go in'. A craftsmen called somebody a scab and a T and G steward said 'You're the ones who are always scabbing on us' - which is true in terms of the history of the plant.

Yet it was the first time in the Halewood plant's history that production workers had themselves scabbed on a strike, albeit on another union, setting a dangerous precedent for the future. Advising their members to cross picket lines could only make scabbing appear respectable and serve to divide and weaken shopfloor union organisation by making it easier for Ford to push through attacks on one section of workers after another. It was a reflection of the atrophy of workplace union organisation that had occurred during the 1980s.

Further challenges have confronted steward organisation during the early 1990s. There is Ford's increasingly fierce battle to remain competitive with Japanese car makers Nissan, Honda and Toyota and with the increased competition caused by the 1992 single European market, as well as the recession in the car industry - with cars sales plummeting in Britain amidst a new economic crisis similar to the early 1980s - which led to a dramatic slump in Ford's worldwide profits and accelerated the process of restructuring, with 600 jobs lost in Halewood in 1990 and a further 1,000 to be phased out during 1991 through voluntary redundancy, early retirement and natural wastage. Throughout 1991 the plant was on a four-day or three-day production week and Ford UK executives held crisis talks with full-time union officials and Halewood stewards to renew threats to close the plant unless its closed the gap with its competitors. Unfortunately, senior stewards reacted to the announcement of 1,000 redundancies much in the style of the early 1980s, with factory bulletins urging workers to co-operate with the company:

We should all realise that we have to do the best we can, in our work, our quality and our performance, as these things provide us with the most protection and help the company to sell more cars. We at Halewood are all in the same boat. We all need to pull together

The challenge of a re-designed integrated production system with its demands for wider flexibility, team working and the erosion of traditional demarcation lines separating production from maintenance

workers, unskilled from skilled workers and blue-collar from white-collar workers, will pose new problems and opportunities for steward organisation. Management will be keen to introduce even more efficiency changes, including 'bell to bell' working - getting rid of washing up time or finishing early if the job is done, the right to retime jobs without union agreement, job progression on merit - ending the policy whereby the longest serving workers take the most senior jobs, and the abolition of fixed mealtimes and teabreaks. At the heart of the problem will be management's attempt to bypass the channels of shop steward organisation by communicating directly with the rank and file members on the shopfloor and to create 'group leaders' on the shopfloor, paid £20-25 extra weekly to take on a supervisory role and become the pivot of workers' problems. At the time of writing that was still something which was by no means unproblematic. As Terry Seagraves explained:

There has been a change of attitude at Halewood - it's more co-operative now because the face of management has changed to the people on the shopfloor - but the underlying strength of the steward organisation is still there. People still look towards their steward to represent them even when the company tries to get a group of people together. That is a fundamental thing that the lads do insist on whatever the problem is. The company haven't been able to bang that out of people's heads.

Ultimately, the key factor determining the regeneration of a powerful and independent shop steward organisation inside the

Merseyside plant will be the pressure from below and the level of struggle. It was only through numerous sectional struggles that the collective strength of the shop stewards organisation of the 1960s and 1970s was built in Halewood. But success will also be dependent upon the rise of a new layer of union and political militants to the stewards' leadership, capable of arguing with their fellow workers and showing them in practice that they can carry the struggle forward irrespective of notions of 'profitability' and 'efficiency'.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO RANK AND FILE MEMBERS: 1970s AND 80s

*** the 1970s: activity and accountability**

During the 1970s 'years of militancy' there were virtually daily stoppages of work within Halewood. Frank Drummond recalled: 'The quote was "If you brought your sandwiches to work you were an optimist" '. The reason for the high level of strikes was primarily the 'big stick' approach adopted by Halewood management. Terry Seagraves related the situation in the Body plant:

It was a militant shopfloor in those days, very militant in some cases. But justifiably so because of the way we were being treated. We had a dog of a management. On the white lines area we had three dog-rough people, a senior foreman, a superintendent and a manager. It was 'effing and blinding every time they went onto the floor and they got the same reaction from the labour.

John Bohanna remembered the way new, young shop stewards were encouraged by their more experienced, battle-hardened colleagues:

The first thing we were told is you've got to have a blazing row with the foreman in front of all your workmates on the

shopfloor - and be seen to stand your ground, no matter how weak the foreman is. Don't have any mercy - just go for him. You've got to be seen battling things through, winning disputes.

Even though many disputes were actually started through the initiative of rank and file members the shop steward always had to be seen giving a lead:

Some of the arguments we used then just wouldn't stand up today. We were finding arguments for absolutely anything at all. If a man asked for a sub of his wages and the company refused his mates on the line would immediately stop work. If a person was disciplined and given a verbal warning there would be a strike. The stoppages of work were regular and if the steward didn't lead the strike he would be open to question. He had to be seen up front having a go. Even when the senior steward advised the steward on the section to back down on the issue he usually couldn't afford to, because he wouldn't have been a steward much longer. The section was very confident, they had the power and they used it.

Although management did not allow section meetings during works time, rank and file workers often forced them to allow a meeting when a dispute arose, so the steward could report back on the progress of negotiations. Certainly, it was a period of great advancement for shopfloor

workers at Halewood in terms of the controls over the job that were fought for and established, particularly over the speed of the lines, the movement of labour, job timings, manning and discipline. As Terry Seagraves commented:

The shopfloor instilled confidence into the shop stewards and the stewards knew they could rely on the shopfloor at the drop of a hat over certain issues.

This picture of a highly confident, active and militant rank and file constantly pushing the 'frontier of control' in their favour was confirmed by management representative Barry Senior:

Many of the stewards were just manipulated by their members on the floor. Some of whom were just mischievous in some of the things they did. I mean really mischievous. They were disruptive just for the sake of stopping the line and having a blow. There was no real control by the senior stewards.

Throughout 1970s there was a massive influx of labour as the number of workers in the plant reached its peak of 14,000 in 1978. Many of those employed brought with them their experience of trade unionism from different workplaces across Merseyside and were keen to establish counter-controls to managerial authority. The close scrutiny of stewards' activities placed them under a direct form of democratic accountability in which the challenge of alternative ideas and personalities was a constant

feature. Stewards' positions were invariably contested at election time by more than one candidate and there was a relatively high turnover of personnel; union records in the Body plant indicate the sectional stewards' tenure of office averaged only 4-5 years, although it was longer for senior stewards. As Terry Seagraves explained:

In the white line area there was a high turnover of stewards. There was 2 stewards for about 300 men and there was that many different issues going on - mainly timings, work methods, mobility of labour - that if a steward let down on a certain issue he'd get challenged. He'd see his term of office out but inevitably he'd face a challenge, particularly in the high-profile areas like the moving lines.

Sectional stewards often found themselves having to walk the tightrope between working on the job and representing their members interests, under twin pressures from both management and rank and file workers. On the one hand, Ford's reluctance to let stewards off the job to negotiate often provoked stoppages of work, although management were also under pressure to grant stewards facility time so that they could help resolve disputes quickly. On the other hand, while rank and file workers recognised the need for their steward to have time-off work to represent them they also often complained when they felt they were spending too much time in the Convenor's office. As a result, many stewards tried to stay on the job for at least some of the time by having reliefs or working on a 'Micky Mouse' job which they could get away from without too much

disruption. As John Bohanna explained: 'It was amazing. It meant you had to be seen to be working alongside people, to be there on the job, and not be there at the same time, if you were going to be able to represent them properly'.

Of course, it is also necessary to take account of the rather problematical (non-strategic, vulnerable, volatile and contradictory) features of rank and file workers' self-activity in relation to which, and even against which, shop steward leadership operated. Certainly, it would be mistaken to picture all the stewards in Halewood during the 1970s as 'militants'. Ritchie O'Connell explained the situation inside the Assembly plant:

We were always the ones accused of causing strikes but it wasn't true. I'd say 99 times out of 100 it was the steward who was trying to dampen things down, to resolve the dispute. We would find ourselves the lads in the middle - on one side, we would have the 'macho-managers' and on the other side we had our undisciplined members - and we were in the middle, constantly dealing with the lads, trying to get them back to work and resolve the problem that way.

Frank Drummond agreed:

Quite a lot of times people went home against the advice of the shop stewards. They probably got carried away with the euphoria of how to win things. On some occasions it became quite

indisciplined, silly strikes that should never have taken place. The stewards weren't always in control of the shopfloor.

Often stewards felt obliged to support their members even though they acted against their advice. Nonetheless, evidence of the stewards' willingness to get disputes settled as quickly as possible was confirmed by their adoption of the 'one hour notice' in the late 1970s. A stoppage of work by a handful of workers often led to thousands being laid-off elsewhere in the plant, which in turn threatened lay-offs in the adjoining plant. Although the grievance could potentially have been settled within the space of an hour or two - before lay-offs occurred - striking workers on occasion did not wait for the steward; they just walked out of the plant and went home. As John Bohanna explained: 'This blew the company's brains. They couldn't do anything if people weren't there - there was no way of resolving the situation'. Yet in the late 1970s, the stewards agreed to a 'one hour notice' which gave the company an 'eleventh hour' during which people waited after a stoppage of work to see if it could be resolved before they left the plant.

The role of the senior stewards was rather more complex. Both the Convenors in the Body and Assembly plants were on a permanent day-shift and were provided by management with an office and paid to be the full-time union representatives in the plant. Spending much of their time in negotiations with plant management or monitoring the activities of the stewards body they were generally less visible to rank and file members, although they were intimately involved with day-to-day affairs on the shopfloor. Similarly, most senior stewards on the Joint Works Committee did

not even have a nominal job on the shopfloor - enjoying 100 per cent time-off work to conduct union business - although unlike the Convenors they followed the alternating shift patterns of their members. But, whilst the responsibility of their position often encouraged them to take a rather more cautious attitude towards the constant stoppages that flared up they also had to balance this with the pressure from constituents in their own sections.

Ford's corporate long-term strategy of incorporation of the Convenors and senior stewards did gradually succeed in formalising procedures within the Body and Assembly plants and creating a slightly more stable framework within which workplace industrial relations could be conducted. Certainly, there was a concentration of decision making within the top tier of senior stewards, with a tendency for JWC members to negotiate all the major issues in the plant while the sectional stewards merely administered within the boundaries already laid down. The formation of a militant rank and file 'Combine' grouping during the 1978 national pay strike was an indication of the disquiet felt by some shopfloor union activists at these developments. It was an insidious process of integration whose full negative effects would only be sharply revealed during the 1980s. But during the 1970s, a period of constant workplace struggle, there was little basis for any deep seated or long term accommodation between stewards and management, which ensured the relationship between senior stewards and sectional stewards and between the stewards' bodies as a whole and the rank and file were kept relatively accountable. Certainly, the major stoppages in Halewood in 1971, 1977, 1978, 1982 and 1983, as well as many other disputes, organised and led by the Body and Assembly plant

steward committees', provided evidence of their dynamic and firmly based relationship with shopfloor members.

A specific illustration of this relationship was the adoption in 1974 of the 'one-out, all-out' policy towards lay-offs caused by sectional disputes. The shop stewards took the view that if a group of workers in one part of the plant were laid-off because of a dispute elsewhere in the plant there should be an all-out strike. Of course, in practice the policy was only applied sparingly - for example, between six to ten times a year across both plants - usually over issues of discipline and the suspension of rank and file members. Its threatened use was usually enough to force management to back down over particular issues. But it was a powerful bargaining lever that successfully handicapped managerial attempts to 'mould' stewards into their way of operating. In other words, although the shop steward committees' retained a degree of autonomy from the shopfloor, the constant shopfloor struggles ensured they did not become too isolated from the practical needs of their members.

The TGWU Ford Halewood branch linked the stewards day-to-day activities on the shopfloor with the wider activities of trade unionism. The branch met monthly and was attended by about 80 people - including a number of stewards - although depending on the issues being discussed there could be a few hundred in attendance. Significantly, the branch committee was always dominated by stewards from the Assembly plant, where TGWU organisation was more long-standing. In addition, possibly because of the different nature of work and shift systems that operated, the majority of union members attending branch meetings tended to be from the Assembly plant. As Beynon emphasises branch meetings were a key forum

for debate and argument over the strategy adopted by both steward committees, which in theory were subordinate to branch decisions, and a number of young rank and file workers became active in its affairs, often acting as key 'opinion leaders' back on the shopfloor. But the most important arena for contact between the stewards and the members was the shopfloor. Throughout the 1970s section, shift and mass meetings of the full plant membership were a regular occurrence and were called in the event of a dispute or stoppage of work, particularly when lay-offs were imminent. But meetings were also held merely for information purposes, to allow the stewards committees to relay news of ongoing negotiations, possibly as a prelude to action in the future. Leaflets produced by the stewards committees and handed out on the sections were also a common feature of the relationship between stewards and members.

Beynon's study (1984. pl89-211) drew attention to the way shopfloor activism differentiated stewards from the mass of their members. Involvement in day-to-day struggles and contact with events across the plant created within both shop stewards' committees a more radical critique of management than existed generally within the factory. My own research confirmed this picture. Even if some senior stewards, occupying central organisational roles within the plant, on occasions opposed strikes, their representation of rank and file grievances in face of managerial intransigence tended to encourage a more political orientation to workplace industrial relations. Not that, as we have seen, in the majority of cases this translated itself into much more than a 'factory class consciousness'. Big Flame, a revolutionary socialist newspaper appeared in 1970, produced by students with help from a handful of Halewood workers. The International

Socialists (forerunners of the Socialist Workers Party) built a factory branch of about a dozen supporters in 1974-5. But the Labour Party was the most influential political organisation amongst the stewards. Yet the vast majority of stewards were not affiliated to any political organisation. Even so, in formal political terms, the stewards were, by and large, to the left of their rank and file members. But their close contact with the members and willingness to mobilise rank and file activity in the face of management intransigence meant the gap between leaders and led was relatively narrow, particularly in comparison with the 1980s.

*** the 1980s: passivity and bureaucracy**

The 'strong bargaining relationship' established with management during the 1980s had an important impact on stewards' relationship to rank and file members. The abandonment in 1983 of the 'one-out, all-out' policy in favour of 'talking out' disputes, was a reflection of this change. Instead of attempting to link together the unco-ordinated sectional stoppages of work that constantly broke out across the plants - many of which threatened lay-offs - into unified action against management, the senior stewards effectively agreed to isolate and neutralise their impact by adopting a more conciliatory approach towards lay-offs. Many rank and file workers, frustrated at lost earnings and the uncertainty of their long-term job prospects, welcomed the stewards' new agreement on the basis that it was 'better to lose a few hours production than a whole day'. But in the long-term it had the effect of undermining the strength of shopfloor union organisation, as Ray Storey indicated:

Its a lot harder now to get a sectional stoppage because you don't feel as confident as a few years ago. With the 'one-out, all-out' it gave sections protection, it gave them a lot of power because a dispute could lay the whole plant off within a matter of hours. But the stewards accepted a new selective lay-off agreement under which management try to keep the rest of the plant working for up to three days. It's reduced the sectional power of the shopfloor. It's made them feel more isolated because they have virtually no protection now.

Another reflection of the changed relationship between stewards and members during the 1980s, was the massive decline in the number of sectional stoppages, partly because the pressure from below was less forceful and partly because stewards intervened to pre-empt threatened action. Furthermore, with the introduction of new technology leading to thousands of voluntary redundancies, the average age of the workforce in Halewood generally became much older than previously - because it tended to be the younger workers who took the money - with the average age rising to about 40. Many shopfloor workers, with family responsibilities and teenage children, became heavily dependent on a regular weekly wage packet. Ray Storey recalled the transformation in the Assembly plant:

There were almost daily stoppages when I first started at Ford. Lines would be stopped for half an hour or an hour - there used to be loads of gaps on the line because of the shortage of car bodies. But today you rarely get a gap on the line from 8

o'clock in the morning until quarter to five. It's almost continuous production now...The stewards are quite pleased with that. They've patted themselves on the back saying 'We've kept you in and saved you money'. 10 years ago the stewards' role was trying to resolve disputes - except there were a lot more disputes and they were under much more pressure to solve them satisfactorily to the rank and file. Disputes could get out of their hands very quickly whereas today the stewards are much more in control.

What disputes did occur became more institutionalised and procedures more formal, with the senior stewards involved at an early stage whenever the threat of strike action arose on a section. The attitude of compromise - to change the image of Halewood as a strikebound plant - predominated. The constant phrase used was 'we've got to keep our ammo dry'. Barry Senior confirmed the stewards' change of attitude by the early 1990s:

The stewards realise now they can't win everything. They realise that you just can't stop the plant over a small minor sectional issue. Before they get themselves into a situation of stopping the job they consult more widely with the senior stewards. They think to themselves what will be the consequence of stopping the plant? What will it do in terms of politically embarrassing our national trade union officials? Or when the vice-president of manufacturing gets onto them and say's 'what

the hell are you people doing at Halewood?'... Sorts of consideration they wouldn't have cared about in the past.

An extreme example of such constraint occurred in the Body plant in 1987, when 10 line workers with a grievance over work arrangements met with their steward and decided to take strike action for the rest of the shift and return to work the next day. According to John Bohanna:

When the Operations Manager found out he hit the roof, he went beserk. 'It's the end of Halewood'. The massive pressure of competition means that the company can't afford to be seen allowing strikes to take place, they have to be stopped. So they sent out a car with a senior steward and an IR manager to visit each individual's house to get everybody back to work. They knocked on people's doors and said the trade unions had agreed to call the strike off. Most lads did go back but they were bloody upset. It was unbelievable, something I would never have dreamt could happen.

Meanwhile, the isolation of the Left became pronounced during the late 1980s. For example, in the Assembly plant, the Convenor's position, occupied between 1970-87 by Billy Maguire, a middle of the road Labour Party member, was filled by Ritchie Rollins, who with the deputy Convenor, Jack Jones, was a hard-line 'Kinnockite' supporter. A number of other stewards who were members of the Labour Party were critical of

Kinnock's right-wing leadership but believed the only way to change things was to get a Labour government elected; until then, all that could be done was damage limitation, making sure not to 'rock the boat' and jeopardise an electoral victory. The Left on the stewards committee was marginal and not organised. There was Tony Jones, a Labour councillor sacked for taking too much time off work; Alan Dean, who took 3 years' leave of absence to become deputy leader of Liverpool Council, spearheading the enforced redundancies of council workers during 1991; and Ray Storey, the single member of the Socialist Workers Party in the plant, who held a steward's card between 1988-1990. Inside the Body plant, the Left was in a more prominent position with both John Bohanna and Terry Seagraves as long-serving senior stewards, but no more influential.

The impact of the ideas of 'new realism' within the trade union movement became evident, with many stewards accepting management's view that Halewood had to be made more competitive in order to have a future. Ray Storey related an argument that occurred at a TGWU branch meeting attended by stewards and shopfloor activists, many of whom were Labour Party supporters:

We talked about the lines being speeded up. The stewards were saying this is a good thing, we're building more cars at Halewood, it means Ford are unlikely to close the plant. When I said, 'Well I work on the line and I don't think it's a good thing the line speeds are going up - we're working hard enough already as it is' - I was just ridiculed. They said 'Don't expect Ford to produce cars and not make a profit.' And I said

'Well, that's their philosophy, but it shouldn't be ours.

Anyway profits don't guarantee jobs, they haven't stopped the head count going down at Halewood.' But that's what the stewards lack - any wider, general politics that provide counter-arguments to those of management.

Although stewards might have wanted to put up a fight against management their ideological acceptance of notions of 'competitiveness' and 'viability' restricted their ability to fight back in practice and led them, on occasion, to act in conflict with the interests of their members. An example of this occurred in the Body plant in 1989. John Bohanna takes up the story:

There was a safety problem with people working on rickety boards and demanding they be replaced. They waited 5 weeks. That is a sign of the co-operation, in the past that would never have happened, people would have stopped work and demanded it be fixed there and then. But what happened was that the lads wanted to stop work demanding this thing get fixed. So there was a meeting of the stewards and the steward for the section (who is also the deputy Convenor) Ratigan, said 'No, management have promised the work will be done over the weekend'. His attitude was the members' behaviour was a disgrace. The company did start correcting it over the weekend but on the Monday night the shift just walked out because it hadn't been done properly. Ratigan never came in on the Monday

night because he knew what would happen and he's brilliant at surviving like that. Everyone was back the next night because the company worked like thunder to get the flooring right. But when Ratigan met the section on the Tuesday night he maintained they'd been right out of order.

A number of other factors worked to undermine the close relationship between stewards and rank and file members. Because the constant influx of new people into Halewood had ceased and the number of stoppages had declined the constant challenges to the stewards' position from the shopfloor also evaporated. John Bohanna related the situation inside the Body plant:

By and large, stewards stay in the position for a much longer time now than they used to in the past. Most stewards have been in the job for about 10 years and have worked for the company for 15-20 years. On my particular shift there are 14 stewards. Excluding 2 that have just come in - the last newly elected steward was in 1977. 80 per cent of the stewards have remained the same as those who came in during the mid-1970s... There's been a slow stagnation of the same faces.

Gordon Cook reflected on the significance of this 'stagnation' for management-steward relations inside the Assembly plant:

The average age of the stewards has increased, they're all about 40-odd now. Ritchie Rollins, the Convenor, is 50. He's been a shop steward for 18 years. The deputy Convenor, Jack Jones, became a steward about the same time. We've got a number who've been stewards a long time and their whole attitude has changed. Certainly, the ageing factor has changed everybody. We've all grown older, maturer, mellower, more experienced.

Beynon's study emphasised the pivotal role of long-standing and experienced senior stewards in Halewood, by quoting one worker:

It was a bit like the Borgias. They had so much experience you couldn't tell them anything. If you went over with a complaint 'this is wrong, that's wrong' they always had the answer. It was impossible to oppose them really. If you tried, they'd cut your head off. (1984. p350)

My own study confirmed the type of tension between stewards and rank and file members described here. But as Ray Storey explained, the differentiation was not necessarily resolved by the removal of the steward:

I'd say the members are to the left of the stewards in the sense that they have to bear the brunt of what management are doing and the stewards don't work on the line. The restraint

and moderation is something that comes from the steward to the members rather than the other way round... The members don't challenge the stewards more, because although they attack them - 'you're not doing this, you're not doing that' - they don't have the confidence they could do the job themselves. I became a steward in 1988 but most have been in for 10-15 years. The only reason I was elected was because the previous steward had to resign.

Meanwhile, many stewards spent much less time on the shopfloor with their members than in the past. Senior stewards tended to spend over 50 per cent of their time in regular contact with personnel and plant management; meetings at which managers usually told stewards about the company's problems and their plans for overcoming them. In the Assembly plant, even sectional stewards were on 100 per cent time off work (and did not wear blue overalls like their rank and file union members on the shopfloor) and tended to spend a disproportionate amount of their time in the union office with other stewards. Only in the Body plant, did some stewards still work on the line, for example working alternate one-hour shifts with a workmate who covered for them when they were on union business. Generally however, stewards' accountability was under less direct scrutiny than in the past and it was this which allowed stewards a wider freedom to act more independently and bureaucratically.

The decline of sectional or mass meetings took away an important forum for democratic debate and decision making. Rank and file members only received scant information about shop steward decisions and

activities. Even bulletins were few and far between. Senior stewards negotiated changes with plant management, often only informing the rest of the stewards' body after the event, leaving the onus on individual stewards to communicate with their members, most of whom were left in the dark. It helped to foster a passive membership and the more the stewards became linked to management in a 'strong bargaining relationship' the more distant they became from the workers they represented on the shopfloor.

Nonetheless, there were also important counter-pressures and informal workplace sanctions to those acting solely to bureaucratised shop stewards. Every steward was still compelled to go down on the line to deal with issues on a daily basis - meaning they were in frequent dialogue with their members and judged by their ability to satisfactorily resolve issues. As John Bohanna pointed out:

At the end of the day you're only as good as your last job. You can be a brilliant steward, give people everything, but the next day when they turn you get the shock of your life.

An example of the rank and file 'turning' was the 1985 line-workers' re-grading strike. For the previous two years senior stewards had successfully acted like firemen by pouring cold water over the sporadic sectional stoppages that threatened to puncture the co-operative relationship established with management in the plant. As Ray Storey remarked:

Dispute after dispute was lost - because of the role of the senior stewards. People started to think 'what's going on, we aren't winning anything at the moment'. Even though sectional stewards had given their backing to these stoppages the senior stewards managed to sit on them by giving an assurance that line-workers would be re-graded as part of the national pay agreement that was being negotiated by national officials.

In fact, although national union leaders had encouraged them to believe that re-grading was on the cards, no such agreement was ever signed, and when news reached the shopfloor that line-workers would not receive any extra allowance the vast majority of workers in the Assembly plant angrily walked out on strike. The strike began while the Halewood Convenors and senior stewards were away in London at NJNC negotiations on the pay deal. They rushed back to Liverpool to deal with the situation. Yet significantly, because even senior stewards are also sectional stewards this 2-week spontaneous rank and file strike forced them to completely swing around in favour of militant action against the company, even in defiance of the official national union leadership. Ray Storey observed:

We had a mass meeting in the Empire Theatre and there was a demand from the floor for all the stewards to get up on the platform and say where they stood on the strike. One by one they were forced to get up. Even the senior stewards made it

clear they were for a continuation of the strike. It showed they're still responsive to the shopfloor.

The 1988 national pay strike - spearheaded by Halewood workers - underlined this continuing responsiveness of the stewards' leadership. Again, the initiative for the strike came from below, from rank and file members. But it successfully forced the shop stewards to take the lead in organising a major strike - again in defiance of the national union leadership. It is clear that the fact that the members 'turning' remains a continuing possibility represents an important safeguard against the entrenchment of a permanent and invulnerable bureaucracy amongst the shop stewards. Even if management has been able to get away with many things it wanted they have still been obliged to take steward organisation seriously, essentially because there was still pressure from the shopfloor and they knew that if they introduced changes without stewards' agreement there was always the threat of a disruption to production.

But the atrophy of steward organisation generally during the 1980s proved a major handicap to a re-invigoration of the relationship between stewards and members. Whilst the stewards held together union organisation through a difficult period during which most members were relatively passive they tended to lose confidence in their ability to lead battles within their own sections and could often be more conservative than the members they represented. Another problem was the way Left stewards in the Body plant made the mistake of attempting to split the Ford Halewood TGWU branch, looking for short-cuts to the necessary task of rebuilding shopfloor strength to fight management.

Traditionally, the branch was dominated by stewards from the Assembly plant, with Ritchie Rollins and the senior stewards holding the majority of branch committee positions. Not surprisingly, the policy of co-operation with management adopted in the early 1980s was reflected in the 'moderate' stance taken at union branch meetings. Attendance dwindled to about 30-35 members. The handful of Left stewards from the Body plant became increasingly frustrated. When they attempted to open up a discussion at branch meetings with a view to offering support for strikes that occurred in the Assembly plant they were told it was 'shop stewards' not branch business' and blocked from being involved. The picture was not much better on general political issues. In response, during the late 1980s the Left collected 38 signatures from the 44-strong Body plant stewards' committee in favour of having their own separate TGWU branch, receiving the backing of left-wing full-time union officials and eventually after 3 years' wrangling, securing a ballot of the Body plant's union membership on the issue. It was a bad tactical mistake, diverting the energies of the militants down a blind alley. Even the Left in the Assembly plant opposed the plan, as Ray Storey explained:

My argument was that if you don't think the branch is doing what you want then you have to operate within it to change it. I don't think John Bohanna and some of the people arguing for splitting the branch had done that, some of them hadn't even attended the branch meetings. There's no reason the PTA should control the branch, it's just that they've been more successful at getting people to meetings. If they had split the branch

they'd probably have got the same right-wing control growing up within it anyway...They accused the right wing of using bureaucratic manoeuvres to get their way but they adopted the same tactic - they wrote to regional officials to help them, they relied on the official machine. The PTA stewards thought the regional officials supported splitting the branch so they could build their own little power base, because they resented the power the Ford TGWU branch has and wanted to cut it down to size and control it.

Not surprisingly, not only did the right-wing Assembly plant senior stewards campaign against the split - distributing leaflets to the Body plant's workforce prior to the ballot through the auspices of the branch committee - but they were also able to convincingly, and with some justification, pose as the defenders of unity and strength:

Brothers, you have your own branch, the one you're in now and you should defend and support it by voting YES in this vote. Ask yourself why this ballot is going on. Ask yourself who stands to gain. Ask yourself why outside influences are involved. Ask yourself why only part of your branch is getting a vote. Two different branches of the TGWU members could easily carry different policies on wage claims of site importance causing major disputes and unnecessary demarcation and friction. Ask yourself why local and senior officers are working so hard to split your branch. The reality is that

certain people want to politicise your branch. Because they have been unsuccessful they seek a split by conning people to believe they are being deprived. What a lie...If the Ford Motor Company were to draw up a plan to split the shopfloor they couldn't have done a better job. The slogan of your branch banner is 'Unity is Strength'. Let's stay that way...Vote YES for UNITY.

Although the Left in the Body plant also distributed leaflets a sizeable number of the stewards who had originally been signatories to the call for a separate branch gradually withdrew their support. John Bohanna reflected:

The branch created the fear that we were Lefties who wanted to politicise people, we would have control of the money, be able to order them out on strike even if they didn't want to. And the membership bought it.

The ballot result produced a 2-1 vote in favour of retaining the existing branch. Yet again, it was a massive and unnecessary set-back for the Left. It served to boost the authority and confidence of the right wing in both plants and within the TGWU branch, a major beneficiary of whom was Halewood management. Arguably, the reason why this sort of thing had not happened in the 1970s was because, confronting an intransigent management and representing a combative workforce the best militants at Halewood had been preoccupied with building up the strength of

shopfloor organisation. Even if the TGWU branch is constitutionally the premier union body in theory, the Left understood that day-to-day shopfloor conditions were the key concern in practice. It was not a question of counterposing one to the other. The Left was involved in both, but the emphasis was tilted towards shopfloor organisation. But, with management's 'poisoned handshake' approach and the downturn in workers' struggles in the 1980s, the Left looked to the union branch as a short-cut solution to advance workers' interests rather than the hard slog of trying to restore morale and rebuild an organised core of opposition on the shopfloor by putting management to the test within each section of the plant, using the branch as a secondary forum in that task. Yet only through such sectional strength can a real democratic and accountable relationship between stewards and members be constantly re-invigorated.

Finally, what of the future? Perhaps the most serious long-term threat to the relationship between stewards and members at Halewood is 'team-working'. Already each section of the Assembly plant has been divided up into groups of 10 with 'group leaders' recruited from the shopfloor, responsible for ensuring all the jobs are manned, arranging breaks and organising simple maintenance. Part of the aim is to improve job flexibility. But it is also to by-pass the stewards organisation. Ray Storey explained:

The group leader is paid about 10 per cent more, he's like a chargehand at the moment. People accept things off the group leader because he's seen as one of them which they wouldn't accept from the foremen. But he could be in an ambivalent

position, getting his ear bent by management. But at the moment they're not subjecting him to that much pressure. On any big problem you would still involve the foremen and the steward. But it is undercutting the steward to a certain extent because if you have a minor problem you see your group leader. As for the future it depends on whether management use the group leaders to tighten up on the quality of work. It represents a long-term threat to steward organisation.

Management also want to introduce 'Integrated Manufacturing Teams' of skilled and semi-skilled workers who will be responsible for the maintenance and operation of a specific segment of the manufacturing process. Those who get into the teams will be able to earn extra allowances if they continually raise their level of skills and work on new technology. But the danger of team-working for steward organisation during the 1990s is not insuperable. There are always contradictions in such management strategies which can be exploited by an effective shopfloor organisation, for example, altering the stewards' constituency to encompass a number of teams within a section of the plant. Yet only a substantial recovery in the level of struggle and the active intervention of a new layer of activists is likely to push the pendulum of democracy and bureaucracy in another direction than the inheritance left by the downturn of the 1980s.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO UNION OFFICIALS: 1970s AND 80s

*** the late 1960s/1970s: establishing lay representation**

The Ford Halewood stewards' relationship with local Transport and General Workers Union officials during the 1970s was always relatively independent. On the one hand, there was traditionally close contact between the two, particularly as local union officials tended to be ex-Ford Halewood workers themselves. Eddie Roberts described the role of the local official during the early 1960s, when the plant was being unionised:

Although full-time officers shouldn't be seen as very important in the scheme of things, Sam Glasstone was a good old fashioned blood and thunder trade unionist who was just what the doctor ordered to stand up to the bullies at Ford's. We loved him. But he used to have an ambivalent view of things. 'He's just a glorified shop steward' other officers used to say. When he addressed a meeting he'd say 'Look lads, I've got to tell you this, you're out of procedure, so nothing is gonna be made official here - Now I don't blame you. If I was in there I would have been out a bit fucking quicker'. So we used to say 'We don't expect any of them to be made official, we ain't going back, so you can go in there tell them that'. And he'd

say 'Fair enough, I like that'. Management would tell him his members were out of order and he'd say 'Well, I've told them that, but they're not coming back to work, unless and until'.

After the establishment of a well organised shop stewards structure inside the Halewood plant the relationship with local officials became much more autonomous. The resources at their disposal enabled stewards to acquire the experience necessary to handle a variety of grievances and negotiations within the confines of the plant. For example, until his death in 1987, Billy Maguire was Convenor of the Assembly plant for 17 consecutive years, his experience rivalling the local officials'. In these circumstances, there was little reason to call for external assistance, except to perform those tasks which only a full-time officer was authorised to carry out, such as giving formal ratification to an agreement or taking a major dispute into procedure. Thus, the vast majority of stoppages of work were 'unofficial' and were dealt with internally by the Halewood stewards themselves, without the involvement of union officials. There were, however, some exceptions to this, particularly when either plant faced lay-offs. Moreover, on occasion, management saw the advantage in using the officials to sort out unruly sections of workers, as Barry Upham recalled:

I can remember one incident around 1976-8, when the Regional Organiser of the T and G, Dickie Palmer, was brought in. We had a lead dinking booth. It was always a troublesome area because it wasn't an easy or likeable job because the guys had to wear

spacesuits and respirators. It was one of the most famous places in the Body plant where 'welt working' was rife and the booth was in and out by the minute on strike over all sorts of issues. We involved the officer and we fired all the lead diskers and after an appeal we agreed to reinstate them provided they sign a declaration that they would be good guys in the future. But we didn't reinstate all of them, some of the militant ones stayed dismissed. Now that was with the knowledge and concurrence of the Officer. So he recognised that whilst he would always have to support his members things were running out of control and something had to be done for the greater good of the greater number of his members.

On the whole though, the shop stewards operated relatively autonomously of the local officials, without their involvement in the details of workplace industrial relations. Much more important was the stewards' relationship with national union officials, particularly those represented on Ford's corporate negotiating machinery with the trade unions, embodied within the National Joint Negotiating Committee (NJNC). Ford's had formalised its negotiating procedure in 1955, earlier than most British companies, when it signed a procedure agreement with full-time national union officials from the 22 unions with members in the British plants. This ratified centralised negotiations over the major questions of pay and conditions and led to a separation between plant-level shop stewards and the national officials who represented the unions on the NJNC. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Ford's attempted to maintain this collective

bargaining regime, dealing exclusively with national trade union officials and ignoring the shop stewards, except for local bargaining purposes. Thus, at the Dagenham plant, a powerful but highly autonomous shop stewards' committee developed, with few links with the NJNC or with the formal trade union structures (Beynon, 1984. p79). By contrast, the Halewood plant was characterised by the emergence of a shop stewards' organisation determined to forge links and alliances with the official structures of their union, the TGWU. They were influenced by the experience of Dagenham, where an isolated plant organisation suffered a severe setback after the successful victimisation of its leading stewards in 1962, and by the experience of workers at the nearby Dunlop plant in Speke, where stewards had gained considerable influence within the TGWU by getting represented on key union committees. The 'Dunlop way' seemed to offer the possibility of using the official trade union structures 'but without illusions' in its 'bent' national officials and it was this approach that was adopted by the Assembly plant stewards. By 1967 they were a force to be reckoned with in the TGWU at regional level and in 1968 had gained a seat on the national executive committee (Beynon, 1984. p83).

Meanwhile, from the late 1960s a 'devolution of power' to shop stewards had been openly encouraged by TGWU officials, with a more central role in shopfloor negotiations for stewards and far closer links between them and official union structures. Devolution may be seen, at least in part, as a pragmatic response to the position which shop stewards had achieved informally in many areas of the TGWU's membership, as at Ford Halewood. Nonetheless, growing rank and file discontent at the Labour government's incomes policy during this period pushed the TGWU to put up

fierce verbal resistance to the pay norms and the union increasingly shifted to the Left politically as a 'new breed' of union official took office, particularly in Merseyside. The development of regular contacts between the Ford Halewood and Dagenham shop stewards and the formation of a Ford National Shop Stewards' Combine Committee was another important development and in the late 1960s the Halewood and Dagenham stewards attempted to reform the NJNC and the joint unions' national bargaining machinery that concentrated all effective decision-making in the hands of full-time union officials. The Ford National Convenors' Committee - a body comprising of Convenors from each of Ford's UK plants - organised lobbies of the NJNC meetings in London and demanded the referral of all national decisions for ratification in the plants. Eddie Roberts recalled:

As far as national officers were concerned we quickly learned - mostly through the experience of the Dagenham people who hated the national officers and felt so badly let down by them - the corrupt bastards they were on the National Joint Negotiating Committee. They used to have their meetings in the Cafe Royal in London. There wasn't any democracy or accountability or opportunity for the wishes of the membership to be transmitted, you weren't allowed to have any say in the compilation of the pay claim or other issues. Even though we had developed quite good structures in terms of shop steward organisation and in terms of getting resolutions passed through the TGWU, no one took any notice of us at the NJNC. So stewards and Convenors used to be outside the Cafe Royal lobbying the national

officers. That was the relationship we had with the national officers at that time. We had disdain for them.

Meanwhile, a national unofficial delegate conference of shop stewards from all the Ford plants in the UK was instituted - known as the 'Coventry Conference' because it met at the TGWU's Transport Hall in Coventry - to decide general policy and formulate immediate demands. Policies agreed at these delegate Conferences were binding on all plants and the National Convenors' Committee was given the task of securing the implementation of decisions reached. Again, Halewood stewards were centrally involved; and in 1969 it was the Convenors and stewards in the Assembly plant who took the initiative in organising plant-wide walk-outs in response to Ford's proposed 'package deal' containing 'penalty clauses' aimed at curbing 'unconstitutional action'. The unofficial stoppages quickly spread to a national Ford strike and brought to a head the whole problem not only of industrial relations in the plants but also the relationship between the union officials on the NJNC and the plant based shop stewards.

Despite the backing given to Ford's package deal by the NJNC - dominated by right wing trade unions - the strike was given official support by the left-wing TGWU general secretary, Jack Jones and AEU President, Hugh Scanlon, and their national executives, reflecting the internal differentiation within the union officialdom. As a result the structure of the NJNC collapsed and the chairman of the trade union side of the committee and the TGWU's national officer both resigned their positions. After the strike - which forced Ford to water down its 'penalty

clauses' - the NJNC was reconstituted with a more proportional distribution of seats between the various unions, and for the first time ever, lay representation from the plants. 4 places on the Committee were granted to Convenors (including the 2 TGWU Convenors from the Halewood plants, Eddie Roberts and Les Moore) to sit with the full-time national officials. Eddie Roberts drew out the significance of the change:

It was a tremendous advance. The lay representation at least ensured we had some say on the agenda. We didn't make any difference to the actual style of negotiation. That was still conducted through the chair and secretaries, Reg Birch of the AEU and Moss Evans of the T and G would do the talking, and we would just sit there like we were in a goldfish bowl. But we were there to observe and carry back and it made a significant difference, it was a breakthrough. For example, we put 'parity' on the agenda. Ford's weren't happy with the development.

Meanwhile, 2,000 Halewood workers from the Body plant left the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU) disgusted at its failure to back the strike and joined the TGWU, which became the majority union in the plant and on the stewards' committee. Thus, the 1969 strike represented a significant victory for shop steward organisation in the Halewood plant. It proved itself to be highly responsive to the demands of a confident rank and file membership and able to act as a powerful counter-weight to the bureaucracy of official trade union structures.

Of course, this independence from the national union leaders was a relative phenomenon and not an absolute state of affairs. That the scope for independence could be narrowed was illustrated in 1971 when Ford plants across the country voted to join those at Halewood and Swansea who had walked out on strike in response to Ford's pay offer of a £2 increase on the basic rate. The national strike was aimed at establishing 'parity' with the earnings of Midlands carworkers. It lasted for 9 weeks until 'left wing' union leaders Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon bypassed the NJNC, (of which they were not members) secretly concluded a deal with Ford's UK Chairman - which prohibited further strikes over pay for the next 2 years - and presented it as a 'fait accompli' to the official negotiators and plant shop stewards. Instead of allowing mass meetings to decide whether to go back to work they insisted on a secret ballot of the workforce, exactly as the Tory government's hated Industrial Relations Act demanded. Although the pay settlement was higher than the Tory government would have liked, Ford's had found that collaboration was still possible, even with 'left' union leaders, and within a matter of days they were clamping down on shopfloor organisation, sacking John Dillon, a steward in Halewood's Assembly plant.

Meanwhile, the opening up of the NJNC also proved to be double-edged. Significantly, the 1969 Ford strike had initially posed a serious threat to the NJNC itself and its preservation as an authoritative joint union-management bargaining forum became the company's top priority. Paradoxically, the widening gap between national union officials and shop stewards within the plants gradually persuaded Ford that it would be better to deal with accountable shopfloor leaders who could be held responsible

for their side of a negotiated agreement rather than be reliant on remote national officials alone. During the 1970s they began to make a virtue out of what had previously been a necessity, taking a series of initiatives aimed at democratising the NJNC and progressively involving plant Convenors and senior stewards in an institutionalisation of conflict within formalised company-union procedures. The admission of all 21 UK plant Convenors to the trade union side of the NJNC in 1978 was more than a symbol of the transformation of industrial relations in Ford; it reinforced the authority of the NJNC and demonstrated how far the company was prepared to go in its attempt to incorporate the senior layer of full-time union representatives in the plants (Friedman and Meredeen, 1980. p347).

Although the NJNC did not usually directly intervene in domestic plant issues - except those relating to national pay agreements or company wide strikes - the involvement of 2 Halewood Convenors in more or less regular contact with Ford UK executives and national full-time union officials inevitably had a significant effect on the conduct of steward organisation on the site. Ford encouraged them to take a more active part in persuading their rank and file members and stewards to remain at work and 'talk out' grievances rather than 'walk-out' without allowing procedure to operate. To assist them in this, senior stewards were granted much more leeway to take time off work to conduct union business and a variety of facilities were granted. Moreover, the Convenors increasingly came under the pressure of full-time trade union officials who expected them to 'carry the plants' in support of formal commitments and agreements made nationally. These pressures towards 'incorporation' encouraged the formation in 1978 of a small militant rank and file organisation

disaffected with the way the Convenor system linked contact between the plants directly through the official channels of the NJNC. It called itself the 'Ford (UK) Workers Group (Combine)' and successfully established supporters' groups in a number of plants across the country. One of the largest groupings was based at Halewood - of about a dozen unaligned left-wing activists, including a handful of shop stewards. Formed some months before the 1978 national strike, with the object of campaigning for the pay claim, the 'Combine' produced many thousands of leaflets, stickers and 'Fraud' badges parodying the 'Ford' logo, and kept up constant pressure on the NJNC by organising regular lobbies of the London negotiations, with up to 150 workers attending from across the country. It aimed to build a rank and file opposition to those Convenors and senior stewards who were becoming more distant from the shopfloor and during the dispute tried to play the role that a fighting national strike committee might have undertaken - organising flying pickets to the docks, transporter depots and Ford dealers.

Nevertheless, even if most plant Convenors on the NJNC were implicated in the union officials' recommendation to accept a deal far short of the £20 and 35 hours claim, Halewood proved to be the exception. It was the only Ford plant in the country where the stewards committee recommended rejection, although the rank and file, even here, voted to return to work. After the strike, the 'Combine' supporters in Halewood produced a few copies of a duplicated bulletin named 'The Halewood Worker', which aimed to 'break down the isolation and the lack of communication between workers in the plants'. (11) But the group withered away with the downturn in workers' struggles during the mid-1980s.

Yet it would be mistaken to assume that the process of incorporation of the Convenors and senior stewards at Halewood was unproblematic. Certainly, the tradition of fighting semi-independently of the full-time officials - firmly established in the 1960s - was not lost overnight during the 1970s, even though there were rather different levels of autonomy between the stewards committees in the Body and Assembly plants. According to John Bohanna:

The most important difference in historical terms is that the Assembly plant was always more under the official line of the union whereas the Body plant conditioned itself to attempt to run outside and within the official line. We always saw that when the officials came in it was to smack our hands because we'd acted just as workers and the union was something distant, although we were always under the union's protection and we were acting out policies of the union and making greater demands as a shop stewards organisation. But the Assembly plant would adhere and recognise the official union line when we were just not bothered with it.

But it was the lack of a deeply rooted and stable accommodative relationship between stewards and management in either of the Halewood plants that ensured, despite the inherent danger of an assimilation of senior shopfloor activists into the institutions of collective bargaining at company level, that there were powerful counter-vailing factors operating against the attempt by national union officials

to win backing for policies of restraint. Essentially, it was the level of shopfloor militancy during the 1970s that ensured they were held directly accountable to their rank and file members and acted relatively independent of union officials. Significantly, the Halewood plants were much more militant than other Ford plants across the country. Traditionally, every pay offer was rejected by the Halewood steward committees and recommendations for rejection made to mass meetings of the membership, usually only to be outvoted by the other more cautious Ford plants. Halewood was invariably the initiator of national strike action, often without waiting for official union sanction, for example in 1969, 1971 and 1978, and was usually the last site to return to work following national ballots.

The explanation for why this was the case cannot be sought solely in terms of the Halewood plants themselves. It is also necessary to place the Halewood stewards within the wider context of Merseyside - its economy, and its political, social and cultural traditions (see Beynon, 1984 for some discussion of these traditions). The key point here is that it further illustrates that, compared with most other Ford plants in Britain, the Halewood stewards retained a high degree of autonomy from full-time union officials during the period of the 1970s.

*** the 1980s: transmission belt of influence**

During the 1980s the relationship between the Halewood shop stewards and full time union officials underwent a radical change. The downturn in struggle within the plant left its imprint on the willingness

and ability of shop stewards to act independently of the national union leadership. Whereas in the 1970s there had been a quite powerful shopfloor organisation with a tradition of action without relying on the union officials, in the 1980s the plant Convenors and stewards were increasingly drawn into a more institutionalised relationship with both the company and union leaders. Economic recession, mass unemployment, and the threat of factory closure sapped the militancy of shopfloor workers, which in turn undermined shop stewards' confidence to act independently of the officials. Thus, the pendulum shifted from the relative independence of shop stewards from the union leadership towards a relative dependence on them. The extent of the dependence that would develop was indicated in 1981, after the Halewood 'Double Doseing' strike. Ford only withdrew its 'disciplinary code' after a reconvened meeting of the NJNC had agreed to a 'detailed commitment from union leaders to improve self-discipline on the shopfloor'. That meant twisting the arms of the shop stewards and members. TGWU national official, Ron Todd, sent a personal letter to all Ford workers calling on them to demonstrate 'self-control'. It stated:

The trade union's aims in negotiations on behalf of Ford workers are too often inhibited by our failure to honour the agreements that we sign on your behalf. We therefore require our members to reinforce our commitments to ensure that our agreements are observed. Unless we operate as a disciplined and united trade union force we can never direct our efforts against the major problems facing our future - new technology, predicted job losses, foreign penetration of our markets - all

of these require our individual attention if we are to safeguard our future interests (Freeman, 1984. p225).

During the early 1980s the entire weight of the official union bureaucracy - with its 'new realist' philosophy that militant strikes were a thing of the past - was consistently placed on the Halewood Convenors and stewards, encouraging them to act as 'policemen of discontent' in order to avoid frequent 'unconstitutional stoppages'. TGWU full-time officials joined the chorus of those warning that Halewood faced closure unless the stewards 'put their house in order'. Such external pressure was of crucial significance in giving the Body and Assembly plant Convenors the legitimacy necessary to convince their respective stewards' committees of the need to adopt a new co-operative approach with Halewood management. It was a reflection of the more general defeatist attitude adopted by national union leaders in face of a hostile Thatcher government and employers' offensive.

Virtually every initiative taken by Halewood management throughout the 1980s, aimed at involving shop stewards in a collaborative drive to boost efficiency and productivity, was given wholehearted backing by TGWU full-time officials. Thus, even though the Halewood stewards continued to retain a high degree of autonomy in relation to the local district TGWU officer, they became more and more subservient in their relations with and ideological acceptance of right-wing policy emanating from national union officials. Another problem was the activities of senior stewards within the higher echelons of the TGWU machine. John Bohanna emphasised the

significance of the 'moderate' Assembly plant stewards dominance of the Halewood TGWU branch:

The branch is one of the largest in the country with 6,000 members so obviously its an important stepping stone within the T and G, and the right have got it stiched up. Ritchie Rollins [Assembly plant Convenor] is a representative from the branch to the district committee, he's the national trade group representative for automotive workers in Britain and he's on the national executive committee. Jack Jones [Deputy Convenor] is a member of the district committee and from that he's the representative on the national automotive group.

Of course, in the 1970s there had been senior stewards from Halewood represented at various levels of the TGWU's machinery. But generally, they tended to be left-wing influenced stewards concerned to advance the interests of shopfloor workers at the expense of, and in direct opposition to, the interests of the employers. For example, they played a part in overturning the union's initial backing of the Labour government's 'Social Contract' in favour of a return to free collective bargaining, which in turn was a prelude to the national Ford pay strike of 1978 which broke through the government's 5 per cent pay norm. But by the late 1980s, the transmission belt of influence, although always a two-way channel, moved much more forcefully from above. Certainly, despite the lay character of the TGWU's governing bodies - such as the National Executive Committee - there was a lot of pressure, particularly as there was relatively little

counter-pressure from below, to look to the permanent full-time officials for guidance on the major national issues. Moreover, although the faction-riven 39-seat ruling body has traditionally been controlled by the left, in the late 1980s the influence of the right became much stronger.

Meanwhile, the 1988 national pay strike graphically exposed the weaknesses of shop steward organisation at Halewood vis-a-vis the national union officials. Initially, both Halewood management and full-time officials were taken by surprise at the 'new mood' of shopfloor militancy expressed by an 88 per cent ballot vote in favour of strike action. The enormous power that Ford workers have was demonstrated when the Ford plant in Belgium was closed and the plants in Valencia and Saarlouis were forced to work part-time, after a little less than two weeks of strike action. Unfortunately, the opportunity to use this power to inflict a decisive victory over Ford's was squandered. Full-time national union officials were able to quickly regain control of the strike and get it called off after recommending acceptance of a slightly improved 2-year deal, which conceded more flexibility in working practices within the plants, albeit subject to local agreement. But if the union officials played their characteristic conservative role it was the erosion of strong shop steward workplace organisation in Halewood (and the other Ford plants) - as a result of the years of collaboration with management - which made it easier for them to get the deal accepted. At first, Halewood shop stewards, under immediate pressure from some militant sections of their members, had provided leadership to the unofficial strike wave. But they failed to involve the majority of workers in strike activity once the plant had been stopped. As Ray Storey explained:

All the way through the strike nothing was done to involve people. Anyone who wasn't a steward was discouraged from going on the picket line. The Convenors wanted it passive, to keep the picket lines down to a minimum. The argument that dominated was that we could win just by sitting tight, nothing more. But as the picket line was the only meeting point for the workforce during the strike that left the majority of people isolated at home where they were vulnerable to pressure to return to work as soon as another ballot was arranged.

The union leaders were able to steamroll the NJNC into accepting a deal which was well below what could have been achieved. Although both shop steward committees at Halewood recommended rejection of the deal they failed to inspire any confidence that more could be gained, not least because the plant Convenors refused to publicly break with the directive to return to work issued from national union officials. Terry Seagraves recalled:

A lot of people wanted to carry the fight on. But the officials seemed determined to accept whatever offer the company came up with. There were 3 final offers. Mick Murphy called one of them 'an historic deal'. It was an hysterical deal as far as we were concerned. People thought we could have got more out of it. The shop stewards' committee did reject the offer but the way the Convenors put it to the meeting didn't inspire people. It was

total defeatism...There was a lot of disgruntlement at the way the officials called it off.

In 1990, the national organiser of the TGWU, Jack Adams, wrote a personal letter to every Halewood TGWU member urging them to break the picket lines of striking craftsmen, on unofficial strike over the national pay deal. Having made an agreement with Ford's the union leadership feared any disruption could lead to the company fulfilling its threat to withdraw investment at British plants. Unfortunately the idea that 'if it's good for the company it's good for the union' led TGWU stewards at Halewood to agree to authorise scabbing against the AUEW and EETPU members. Again, the union officials' stance was carried directly into Halewood by the senior stewards.

Notwithstanding such developments it is important to recognise that there have also been important countervailing pressures operating on the shop stewards during the 1980s, despite the general decline in struggle. Thus, the 1983 Paul Kelly strike, the 1985 line-workers strike and the 1988 pay strike demonstrated that steward organisation is much more responsive and accountable to rank and file pressure than the full-time union leadership. Such strikes illustrated that the problem of dependence is not necessarily of a permanent nature. Because the union officials were so unwilling to fight on their members behalf and were prepared to accommodate to the company, despite the sacrifices many shopfloor workers felt they had made, it created a space in which a minority of rank and file workers were prepared to take the initiative, to act independently from below. It was this which forced the shop stewards

into militant activity, albeit tentatively.

Arguably, such strikes demonstrate the underlying potential of rank and file workers' struggles in the Ford Halewood plant. Of course, in none of the disputes did strikers feel strong enough to defy the officials indefinitely. This reflected the weakness of the stewards organisation that has occurred in recent years. But these strikes provided a potential glimpse of the 1990s. They showed the risk that Ford's run of launching an offensive that could provoke an unofficial backlash in which the rank and file and a re-invigorated shop stewards organisation makes the running, not the union officials.

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CHAPTER FIVE: SOME CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

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INTRODUCTION

Each of the preceeding case studies illustrated how the powerful shop steward organisations built up during the 1960s and 70s were considerably weakened during the 1980s and in the case of the surviving plant, Ford's, continue to face formidable challenges during the 1990s. The qualitative changes in the strength of stewards' organisation were the result of both objective and subjective factors, both external and internal to the workplace. The product market crises of the early 1980s dealt a blow to shopfloor power and presented stewards with immense strategical and tactical difficulties that could not easily be overcome. The shift in the balance of bargaining power to the advantage of management was inextricably linked to the hostile economic and political climate within Britain generally and the Merseyside geographical context in particular, with an avalanche of plant closures and redundancies hitting the region with a vengeance. The downturn in workers' struggles within the British labour movement - deepened by the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984-5 - was another debilitating influence on the strength of the stewards' organisation. The ideological embrace of 'new realism' by the TUC - and the curbing of industrial militancy in favour of a more co-operative stance with employers and the Conservative government - was reflected in the pressure placed on shop stewards by full-time union officials to make wide-

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ranging pragmatic concessions to management. Even many shop stewards (and rank and file members) anxious to minimise job losses and prevent plant closure, embraced aspects of 'new realism', albeit in a more varied, uneven and contradictory fashion than the union officials. The absence of a coherent ideological or political alternative leadership from the Left was a further impediment to any other outcome.

In this concluding Chapter I make a comparative analysis of the shop steward organisations at Birds Eye, Bemrose and Ford's, and relate the case study findings in the main body of the thesis to a critique of the social democratic analytical approach of Eric Batstone outlined in Chapter One, with the aim of drawing out some wider lessons about the underlying dynamics of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness. This involves: a summary of key common themes - with reference to stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and full time union officials; an assessment of the usefulness of my theoretical framework and background hypothesis to the case study research method, specifying the limits of generalisation; an evaluation of the significance of my findings; and some overall lessons on how to rebuild the strength of steward organisation and on the importance of revolutionary socialist political intervention in the workplace.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO MANAGEMENT

All three case studies illuminated the contradiction between conflict and accommodation that lies at the heart of the shop stewards' relationship to management. Managers were often concerned not only to assert their authority and intensify work but to also orchestrate a degree of more active co-operation from workers. Thus, they utilised a variety of tactics to control and motivate workers with shifts and variations in the relationship between force and consent. In turn, these different managerial strategies influenced the development and character of the stewards organisation and its relationship with management.

On the one hand, shop stewards often faced a 'hard line', managerial approach which forced them to respond with a conflictual relationship. Ford's provided a vivid example of this. During the 1970s the 'stick' component of Ford's strategy involved the assertion of unfettered managerial prerogative and the pursuance of tight shopfloor discipline with the aim of achieving high and continuous production levels. It was this antagonistic approach which precipitated constant stoppages of work and encouraged stewards to articulate rank and file grievances, lead shopfloor struggles and build a strong, combative and independent shop stewards' organisation. A similar process, albeit less sharply delineated, occurred at Birds Eye. Of course, in neither workplace was this a uniform process. It varied according to the differential bargaining leverage exercised by sections of workers, the varied experience and leadership of stewards and so on. Moreover, stewards sometimes felt they could not afford to challenge

management on every occasion as outright confrontation could leave workers vulnerable and risk serious defeat. Nonetheless, 'hard line' management at Ford's and Birds Eye did have the effect of encouraging stewards to mobilise their members in a conflictual relationship which challenged managerial authority.

On the other hand, both plants illustrated how shop stewards can also sometimes face a co-operative 'soft line' from management, aimed at incorporating them into an accommodative relationship. Again, Ford's provided the sharpest example of this process. During the early 1980s, in the context of a changed economic and political climate, management's 'poisoned handshake' approach led to a 'backing off' whenever a shopfloor dispute arose so as to talk out issues without confrontation. It led to a routinisation of workplace trade unionism, the demobilisation of collective rank and file self-activity and an undermining of the strength of shop steward organisation. A similar process occurred at Birds Eye. Again, this was not necessarily a uniform picture. In some respects, the more co-operative relationship with management was grounded in real, albeit limited, concessions, although this did not preclude occasional battles with management. But Birds Eye and Ford illustrated that stewards who have established an accommodative relationship with management over a prolonged period of time can become vulnerable to such managerial tactics and thus disarm themselves in defending basic union organisation from encroachment.

Of course, the tension between conflict and accommodation did not express itself in an either/or scenario. The same management could apply both strategies at the same time. Thus, at Ford's during the 1970s,

the 'carrot' component - an attempt to incorporate stewards' organisation by democratising the NJNC and granting stewards plant-level facilities - was a complementary management strategy. Similarly, at Birds Eye, there was a contradiction between a relatively conflictual plant-level management approach (often encouraged by corporate Birds Eye intervention) and the more co-operative approach of departmental managers (although this varied between departments). The overlap was also evident during the 1980s. For example at Ford, management's long-term 'Employee Involvement' strategy clashed with its short-term need to reassert the 'big stick' on occasion, provoking rank and file resistance. At Birds Eye, the apparent new co-operative approach soon gave way to an attempt to force draconian new working practices in the shape of 'Workstyle', provoking outright steward hostility.

Perhaps, the most graphic example of the mix of conflictual and accommodative relationships between stewards and management was demonstrated in Bemrose. Thus, during the 1970s, management had a two-fold strategy. On the one hand, they regularly threatened to close the plant down, particularly whenever contracts came up for renewal, unless productivity was improved. On the other hand, given the nature of the product market, it often made little short-term financial sense to resist chapel demands and jeopardise production, so they were prepared to make significant concessions to win consent (even though the plant was apparently consistently unprofitable). As a result, whilst powerful chapel committee organisations' developed, able to carve out a series of counter-controls to those of management, there was also a relatively high degree of co-operation between the two, for example over the maintenance of

production levels. Of course, a major difference between shopfloor industrial relations at Bemrose compared with Birds Eye and Ford's was the comparatively low level of workers' struggle. The chapel committees' strength came much more from advantageous market pressures, workers' strategic relationship to production and an institutionalised pattern of craft job control than from the daily battles on the shopfloor which characterised the others. Nonetheless, the same contradictory pressures of conflict and accommodation, influenced by managerial strategy, were evident.

However, the contradiction between conflict and accommodation was never equally balanced in any of the three workplaces. In Ford's during the 1970s, it was the 'stick' component that was the predominant managerial strategy, ensuring a relatively high level of workers' struggle and combative steward-management relations which provided little basis for any deep-seated accommodation. By contrast, during the 1980s, Ford's 'poisoned handshake' approach, whilst punctuated by occasional application of the 'big stick', encouraged a quite different co-operative relationship with shop stewards. Similarly in Birds Eye during the 1970s, management adopted a much more antagonistic approach to stewards' organisation than during the early 1980s, until the pendulum swung back again in the late 1980s. Even in Bemrose, despite management's much more complex, ambivalent approach, the day-to-day shopfloor relationship with the chapel committees was relatively more conflictual than co-operative during the 1970s than during the 1980s (notwithstanding the set-piece confrontations on a plant-wide level during the 1980s).

Chapter Five: Some Conclusions and Lessons

The differences in management approach can be explained primarily by their response to changes in product and labour markets, the influence of corporate strategy on plant level managers and the perceived strength of shopfloor union organisation. A critical issue then concerns the influence of management policies and tactics on the nature and character of steward organisation. Clearly, there was no automatic convergence between management approach and shop steward response. It depended on the context and on other factors, such as the level of rank and file confidence and activity and the nature of steward leadership. Thus, Birds Eye management's more conciliatory approach following the 1978 lock-out did not lead to a more co-operative relationship between stewards and management. Paradoxically, although the stewards suffered a severe setback they found management's hesitancy in the face of production problems associated with the new technology provided them with the opportunity to rebuild some shopfloor strength, in the process pushing up manning levels and engaging in plant-wide strike action in defence of two sacked colleagues. By contrast, Bemrose management's confrontationist stance over flexible working practices during the early 1980s did not provoke the chapel committees into militant resistance. In other words, the relationship between management strategy and the nature of steward organisation is not a simple or mechanical one. There are complexities involved. Nonetheless, the tension between conflict and accommodation in stewards' relationship to management was clearly evident in all three workplaces.

What also became apparent were the pitfalls of 'strong bargaining relations'. As was noted in Chapter One, Batstone assumed that

by moderating their goals stewards could achieve more for their members than they could through a more militant perspective (Batstone et al. 1977, 1978). This might mean in specific instances the gains won by stewards would be less than they might have been, but equally there would be other occasions when procedural routes achieved gains (or minimised losses) where outright conflict would suffer resounding defeats. Thus, the moderation of demands involves a rational estimate of the chance of success of different demands. The key question becomes the overall balance of gains and losses and the formulation of the most cost-effective strategy. Although some stewards could have rather ambitious goals (that might even envisage structural change of capitalist society) and be prepared to adopt militant strategy and tactics to pursue them, Batstone seemed to envisage a much narrower horizon of pragmatic reform. Similarly, Jones and Rose (1986) have championed what they have termed 'pragmatic trade unionism', moderate and responsible shop stewards who are not restricted in the range of compromises they are prepared to accept in the form of flexible bargaining over changes in work.

Yet what the case studies showed is that 'strong bargaining relations' effectively failed to deliver, both in terms of substantial material improvements in workers' conditions and in terms of the vitality of shop steward organisation. It is useful to make a comparison between the 1970s and the 1980s. Clearly, there were aspects of 'strong bargaining relations' in both Birds Eye and Ford's during the 1970s, but because of managerial intransigence there was little basis for any deep-seated accommodation. Instead, it was shopfloor activity, a 'do it yourself' militant reformism, enacted from below rather than carried out

from above on workers' behalf, which succeeded in carving out a significant element of counter-control over the immediate work process and provided the basis upon which strong workplace union organisation could be built. For example, in Birds Eye, it was sectional stoppages of work that won improved bonus payments, condition rates and job evaluation, which won the guaranteed working week and May Day holiday and prevented loss of bonus payments when machinery broke down. Such activity also had the merit of forging the strength of stewards organisation. A similar picture was evident in Ford's.

Of course, there were limitations to this combative approach in both workplaces, not least the ambivalent attitude towards sectional militancy taken by some stewards. But the setbacks and defeats suffered during this period were not because of the relatively militant shopfloor approach, but despite it. Even in Bemrose, where 'strong bargaining relations' were much more firmly rooted, management were obliged, due to the peculiar nature of the product and labour markets, to concede very high rates of pay, control over the movement of labour and high manning arrangements, because they feared the shopfloor power of chapel committees' organisation and the threat or use of sanctions to disrupt production. Nonetheless, whilst 'strong bargaining relations' in these circumstances ensured the balance of bargaining power lay to the advantage of the stewards there was a very low level of struggle and serious weaknesses in the cohesion of union organisation.

Significantly, Batstone appears to have assumed that 'strong bargaining relations' were only to be found where there was a broad

balance of power between stewards and managers. In fact, as will have become apparent, similar kinds of relations can exist not only in situations where the bargaining power of stewards is greater (as in Bemrose during the 1970s) but also where it is less (as in Birds Eye and Ford's during the 1980s). Crucially, Batstone failed to take sufficient account of the problems which arise when the institutional framework of bargaining relations becomes insecure or unstable as a result of product market pressures or economic recession (as during the 1980s). Because the 'rules of the game' changed in these circumstances the options open to stewards of shared rules and understandings and 'give and take' were rather different than previously and relying on 'strong bargaining relations' - whatever its estimate of costs and benefits at one point in time - could no longer be guaranteed to deliver the most cost-effective strategy when judged in terms of the defence of established jobs, advantageous working conditions and strong workplace union organisation.

As the case studies exemplified, the consequence of stewards adopting 'strong bargaining relations' during this period invariably meant making wide-ranging concessions to management that would not have been considered in more favourable circumstances. Whilst such pragmatic bargaining provided a number of limited benefits it also had serious disadvantages. For example, at Birds Eye it handicapped their ability to utilise the high demand for the MenuMaster range and their control over the new technology to substantially improve wages, manning levels and working conditions. Moreover, such 'strong bargaining relations' were only maintained at the price of dampening down rank and file self-activity and undermining the strength of stewards' organisation.

Ultimately, it lulled workers into a false sense of job security and ill-prepared them to resist the enforced closure of the plant. The lesson is clear, the key to the advance of workers' interests lies not in sophisticated 'strong bargaining relations' but in the level of confidence and militant activity of rank and file members, and stewards' willingness to mobilise and channel that strength in opposition to management.

In some respects Batstone's whole notion of reformist workplace trade unionism and 'pragmatic bargaining' underlines the manner in which shop steward organisation necessarily operates on a terrain which inevitably involves compromise and trade-offs. Certainly, it was understandable that during the 1980s, faced with the threat of plant closure, some stewards felt it necessary to abandon the relatively militant strategy of earlier years to adopt a more flexible and co-operative relationship with management. The case studies appear to have provided some evidence to suggest that no matter how structurally strong or militant, the limitation of workplace trade unionism is that it is not in a position to systematically rather than episodically encroach on managerial prerogative when faced with attempting to thwart large scale redundancies or plant closure. The problems of a purely plant-based locus of action and the absence of mass political mobilisation inside the British labour movement more generally were graphically exposed. Nonetheless, arguably there was no inevitability about the tyranny of market forces, in the form of corporate restructuring, riding roughshod over shop steward organisation. It would be mistaken to assume an iron law of development which somehow predetermines how stewards will react and underestimate the part that shopfloor struggle and conscious intervention could, despite the material obstacles,

potentially have played. Certainly, the case studies signalled the varieties of approach adopted by different shop stewards within each of the three workplaces (for example between Joe Barton and Joe Carberry in Birds Eye or Billy Maguire and John Bohanna in Ford's). A key question is whether a different political leadership could, potentially, have substantially altered the course of events or not. The distinction between a reformist and revolutionary socialist approach within the workplace is examined in more detail in the next section.

Finally, what of the future? Can shop stewards, at least at Ford's, rebuild a strong workplace union organisation and push the balance of bargaining power away from management's advantage? Has the new climate of 'responsible' workplace industrial relations really become ingrained or will it evaporate as the company struggles to maintain momentum in fiercely competitive markets? Arguably, the significance of the 1988 strike is that it offered a glimpse of how a renewed sense of workers' confidence can be felt when particular circumstances coincide. In this case, it was the company's high profits, a lowering of unemployment and a feeling that the years of sacrifice had not been adequately rewarded. Workers felt their bargaining strength was stronger and took advantage of this to win a better pay rise than was being offered. But other factors, for example, the introduction of a new car model, a slight upturn in the economy, or an intensification of struggle within the British labour movement generally could boost workers' bargaining leverage in the future. Moreover, Ford's attempt to make fundamental changes to work organisation during the 1990s could undermine the stewards' co-operative relationship of the last decade, particularly if rank and file workers force the pace from

below. In other words, the re-vitalisation of steward organisation and a return to a much more combative stance can by no means be ruled out, although the impact of a renewed economic recession in 1991-2 could seriously hamper such developments.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO RANK AND FILE MEMBERS

A number of commentators have drawn attention to the contrast between 'participatory' and 'representative' democracy in shop stewards' relationship to rank and file members (Terry, 1983a; Fairbrother, 1984; Fosh and Cohen, 1988). Thus, it has been suggested that during the 1950s and 60s stewards were genuine workplace delegates, deeply immersed in the activities and pre-occupations of those they represented; policies emerged out of regular discussion and debate within the workplace and stewards were directly accountable to the membership, liable to be dismissed in the event of an inadequate performance. By contrast, during the 1970s and 80s, following the emergence of a lay elite of full-time senior stewards, there was the development of a more professional, hierarchical and centralised stewards' organisation which became increasingly differentiated from the members (Hyman, 1979; Terry, 1983b). My case study material suggests tendencies towards democracy and bureaucracy tended to co-exist with one another throughout the period. As Beynon revealed, even in the heyday of workplace militancy at Ford Halewood during the 1960s, the shop steward found himself "torn between the forces

of representation and bureaucratisation" (1984. p209). But it would also be mistaken to assume, as Batstone (1985) did, that 'nothing has changed', that steward organisation today is basically as hierarchical and centralised as it ever was in the past and that the 'bureaucratisation of the rank and file' thesis (Hyman, 1979) is misconceived. Arguably, the central issue is not whether stewards have a 'participatory' or 'representative' (in Batstone's terms 'leader' or 'populist') role but what is the balance at any one time between these two co-existing and contradictory tendencies and what were the internal and external pressures pushing in each direction? In each of the three workplaces studied it is clear the relationship between stewards and the members did undergo a qualitative shift between the 1970s and 1980s.

In both Birds Eye and Ford's during the 1970s, there were tendencies towards 'representative' democracy with senior stewards sometimes using their 'power for' the members as a 'power over' them by restraining militancy (for example, at Birds Eye participating in management's break-up of the cold store department) but it was much more towards the 'participatory' component that the pendulum was pushed, partly as a result of the pressure from below, the high level of rank and file struggle - itself a response to hard-line management - and partly as a result of the active intervention of stewards themselves in bargaining on the shopfloor.

Although the steward committees retained a degree of autonomy from the shopfloor the constant struggle ensured they did not become too isolated from the practical needs of their members. In other words, there was a direct connection between the level of shopfloor

confidence, activity and militancy vis-a-vis management and the relatively democratic relationship that existed between stewards and members. There was also a direct link between workplace union democracy and the shop stewards' goals and objectives. The generally combative stance of the stewards encouraged the active participation of rank and file members in union affairs. The experience in Bemrose was more complex. On the one hand, chapel committee representatives maintained a relatively close and democratic relationship with rank and file members; whilst there was not a high level of struggle there was a lot of confidence on the shopfloor vis-a-vis management and there was quite a degree of involvement in chapel and union affairs. On the other hand, the sectional nature of chapel organisation and 'strong bargaining relations' with management facilitated the development of a highly centralised and semi-bureaucratic form of leadership in the hands of the FoCs. But even here there were stronger elements of participatory than representative democracy.

All this was in sharp contrast to the 1980s, a period when the relationship between democracy and bureaucracy swung towards the latter component in all three plants. Again, it was possible to see a connection between the low level of shopfloor confidence, activity and militancy vis-a-vis management and the relatively more bureaucratic relationship between the shop stewards and members that ensued. The 'not rocking the boat' stance towards sectional disputes dissipated the mood to fight and sapped shopfloor morale and confidence. In the context of rank and file demobilisation and passivity stewards became more remote from the direct form of accountability and democratic scrutiny that had previously prevailed. It was also possible to see a connection between the shop

stewards' much narrower goals and horizon and the lack of participation of rank and file members. 'Strong bargaining relations' with management encouraged stewards to act much more on their members' behalf, there was little need to involve them in activity or decision-making and the links binding the stewards to the members were weakened. Of course, it was not entirely a one-way process. The stewards still represented members' day-to-day interests and were placed under some scrutiny and spontaneous rank and file rebellions were an important safeguard against an invulnerable bureaucracy becoming locked into place. Nonetheless, the atrophy of stewards' organisation generally proved to be an important handicap to the re-invigoration of a dynamically accountable relationship between stewards and members.

Thus, although workplace trade unionism faces both external and internal pressures (and counter-pressures) towards democracy and bureaucracy, the distinction between a 'representative' and 'participatory' form of steward role is a useful one. For Batstone the union is organised on the basis of a body of 'leader' stewards who owe their position to their knowledge and expertise and who maintain a steady downward flow of communication to the members. In such a workplace the membership at large have very little responsibility for the active development and pursuit of policies or objectives nor would stewards see any virtue in such involvement. But my case study evidence suggests that without participation by the members a shop steward structure is something of a sham as far as workplace union democracy is concerned. Because the whole logic of trade unionism is collective, workplace union democracy has to be a democracy in which everyone is encouraged to take an active part.

Chapter Five: Some Conclusions and Lessons

Indeed, a 'participatory' form of workplace union democracy is not some abstract ideal model but the most effective practical route to the development of a strong independent shop steward organisation able to obtain real concrete gains for the members and ensure a vibrant form of workplace trade unionism.

In all three workplaces there was a tension between sectional rank and file workers' militancy versus the shop steward committees' plant-wide strategic perspective. On the one hand, the strength of workplace union organisation arose from sectional power and the battle for workers' immediate day-to-day grievances. On the other hand, there was the need to protect the interests of the majority of workers across the plant as unco-ordinated activity threatened the cohesiveness and bargaining authority of the stewards body as a whole. In essence, it raised the question of the relationship between spontaneous shopfloor activity and a collective trade union identity, between sectionalism and generalisation, and the key role played by shop stewards.

The problematic nature of the relationship between rank and file workers' sectional activity and broader political consciousness within each of the three case studies was evident enough. Certainly, sectionalism represented a major obstacle to a unified collectivist response to management. Yet sectionalism was not a fixed state of affairs. On the contrary, the basically antagonistic nature of the labour process gave it a dynamic, uneven and contradictory character, as the shopfloor practice of 'welt working' illustrated. Even though the existence of discrete sections of workers within each plant - divided by the nature of work, department, gender, etc - created the basis for fragmentation and

disunity there were also factors promoting collective trade union attitudes and organisation amongst people who worked together and shared common interests. Moreover, as Batstone revealed, whilst organisational and institutional factors help shape sectional work group behaviour and attitudes, the social networks that inform argument and initiative and through which 'leader' shop stewards promote 'trade union principles' of unity and collective identity are also significant (Batstone et al. 1977; 1978). Of course, Batstone's underlying assumption that rank and file members are only sectionally orientated, requiring a 'responsible' steward leadership to control their undisciplined militancy, was misconceived. But his analysis had the merit of focussing attention on the relationship between workplace activity, union collectivism and the intervention of shop stewards.

Beynon (1984) also probed the extent to which the shop stewards are the catalysts of collective workplace trade unionism. But unlike Batstone, Beynon had a much more positive view of the contribution made by rank and file self-activity. He revealed the dialectical interplay between the day-to-day struggles of shopfloor workers on the one hand, and the distinctive form of 'factory class consciousness' developed by an experienced shop steward leadership on the other, that generates a basic collectivism and opposition to management and through which effective workplace union organisation is developed and sustained. This involves stewards both 'listening to the lads' and arguing with them, sharing their experiences on the assembly line and giving a lead.

What the case studies suggested is that sectional militancy is the bedrock of strong plant-wide stewards' organisation, its

success depending upon the ability of stewards building up the power of union organisation by fighting over the immediate issues that confront their members and involving them in activity, whilst at the same time forging a sense of collective identity between different sections of workers by linking the grievances of the most confident and best organised with those of the less confident and well organised. For example, at Ford's during the 1970s, individual shop stewards 'cut their teeth' on sectional militancy, in the process not only helping rank and file members carve out some control over the job and bolstering their bargaining authority vis-a-vis management but also strengthening the power and esteem of the stewards committee within the plant as a whole. A similar picture emerged at Birds Eye. Whilst the push for collective activity of this kind often came from the committed shop steward or political activist such minorities were effective in mobilising the rank and file and overcoming sectionalism only because the conception of a more generalised, class-wide trade unionism was part of workers' consciousness, at least to some degree, as for example, the solidarity strikes in Birds Eye demonstrated. Admittedly, it swam alongside and was often in competition with other more limited ideas about work and politics, but it could be appealed to and developed.

Unfortunately, during the 1980s the Ford stewards' generally supportive attitude towards sectional militancy evaporated under the policy of co-operation with management. Instead of attempting to link together the unco-ordinated stoppages of work that broke out across the plant into a united strategic challenge to management, the stewards adopted a more conciliatory attitude in favour of 'talking out disputes'. In the long-term this had the effect of isolating and undermining sectional power

and weakening the strength of stewards' organisation across the plant. Again, there was a similar picture at Birds Eye. At Bemrose, the isolation of action to the particular section of a chapel merely had the effect of reinforcing departmental and chapel sectionalism and threw away the opportunity of forging shopfloor links and building up a united approach to management. Whilst the lack of such a joint stance may not have appeared to have hampered the power of union organisation during the 1970s there is no doubt it underlay the chapels' erosion of strength during the 1980s.

Clearly, the contours of workplace struggle are tremendously uneven, so that workers who are passive one day can just as easily be driven to militancy another. Management always try to divide and rule, picking off those troublesome areas which need sorting out at any given time and counting on the passivity of the rest to bludgeon the aggrieved minority into submission. But the proper response to this by shop stewards is not the bureaucratic 'unity of the graveyard' - in which sparks of rank and file militancy are extinguished from above - but an attempt to break the sectionalism by spreading the action and involving other groups of workers in fighting together, levelling upwards to the active minority rather than downwards to the lowest common denominator of the passive majority. In other words, although material and ideological forces within capitalism pull workplace trade unionism towards a limited sectionalist horizon, whether or not they stay there is fixed, not simply by capitalism but to a significant extent by the rhythms of struggle and by the effectiveness of the shop steward leadership to which rank and file workers are exposed.

Another key theme explored within the case studies was the limitations of the stewards' political horizon and the failure of the Left to provide a coherent alternative to the 'pragmatism' of Labourism. Clearly, there were substantial material obstacles to the translation of shopfloor activism into a wider political (let alone a revolutionary socialist) perspective, including internal fragmentation and sectionalism. Yet arguably, the influence of 'mainstream' Labourism - even if not formally embodied in political organisation on the shopfloor - was an important factor reinforcing the limitations and compromises of workplace trade unionism within the three plants. Batstone assumed (as do reformist Labour Party leaders, union officials and shop stewards) that workers can improve their position and obtain reforms within the framework of the capitalist system, without challenging the nature of that system. As long as capitalism seemed relative healthy there was a logic in this, important concessions could be won through workplace bargaining. Thus during the 1960s, much workplace militancy did not have a directly political character, there was what Beynon described as stewards' 'factory class consciousness', a highly developed understanding of the day-to-day conflicts on the shopfloor but a politics essentially limited to the confines of the workplace and not generalised to wider concerns (1984, p108).

During the early 1970s, amidst the impact of economic crisis, political confrontation and the generally combative mood of the working class movement, the influence of the Left grew within the steward committees' in Birds Eye, Bemrose and Ford's (although it remained a minority influence). Yet, although a handful of stewards joined small

revolutionary socialist organisations, many others - whilst often to the left of traditional Labourism - tended to separate economics and politics, operating merely as militant trade unionists in a quasi-syndicalist fashion. This did not prevent them from giving a lead to shopfloor struggles and building up the strength of union organisation during the 1970s. On the contrary, it was often their initiative that pulled other less militant 'Labourist' stewards into action. Nonetheless, trade union militancy alone proved to have severe limitations in the recession years of the early 1980s when the fear of unemployment strengthened management's arguments about the need for 'efficiency' and made workers wary of entering struggle which might threaten the survival of the factory. Certainly, the logic of 'Labourist' reformist politics in this situation was to hold back from fighting, to seek compromises with management and even to become committed to the strike-free running of the plant. Undoubtedly, the lack of confidence to break or at least loosen the vice of employers inside the British working class overall was a key impediment to a more militant and generalised political perspective among stewards and the decline in struggle made the Labour Party and TUC's notion of 'new realism' a much stronger straightjacket to action.

Yet it is my contention that there was no inevitability about this process, no iron law of development which pre-determined how workers would react. Certainly, it would be mistaken to underestimate the part that conscious intervention by individual militant stewards, capable of arguing with their fellow workers and pressing a different course of action to the pragmatism of others, was able to play (for example within the 3-shift area in Birds Eye). Sections of workers often showed a

readiness to fight, even if sometimes this took the form of passive resistance. What they tended to lack was the crucial subjective element needed to turn a defensive action into an offensive one. In fact, many of those who subsequently complained of workers' unwillingness to fight were not free of blame for this. Workers' activity is not like a revolver that can be kept unused for years in the leaders' pockets and then taken out and fired at will. To overcome the inertia, in part the product of lack of confidence and the debilitating effect of 'leave it to us' leadership, workers had to have confidence in themselves and in the stewards that organised and led them. The reformist Labour Party and trade union officials could never have been expected to provide the catalyst for this vital self-activity of workers. But arguably, the Left shop stewards also failed to provide the type of alternative political leadership that might, potentially, have influenced much wider numbers of workers into struggle. Whilst the case study material provides no strong positive evidence to substantiate such an assertion it seems reasonable to point to the very real possibilities that existed for pushing the limits of workers' resistance much more than actually transpired, although what is undoubtedly more speculative is whether the existence of sizeable groupings of revolutionary socialists in each of the three workplaces could have made any fundamental difference to the actual outcome of events. Despite the empirical limitations, an exploration of such an interpretation is both justifiable and necessary, given the analytical and political vantage point of this thesis.

It will be apparent the case studies devoted considerable attention to the question of socialist organisation, an aspect

of workplace trade unionism which commentators often treat only in passing and with a certain disdain. For many observers the various political groupings which play a role are merely part of the kaleidoscope of events, but the three workplaces signalled how the weakness or absence of socialist organisation can often make a crucial difference to workers' struggles. Unfortunately, during the 1970s, the vacuum on the Left in Merseyside, created by the historical weakness of the Communist Party in the region, was not filled by the small far-left groupings, who despite some influence remained relatively marginalised. During the 1980s, the downturn in struggle further isolated the Left, although often their ideas and approach contributed to their own isolation. Thus, in Ford's the Left was never particularly strong, although it did have a base within both the Body and Assembly plant stewards' committees. In Birds Eye, the influence of the Left was much more evident, albeit isolated within the 3-shift area during the 1980s. Only in Bemrose was the Left firmly rooted, at least within the SOGAT chapel, and in an advantageous position to shape the course of events. But in none of the three plants was there a sufficiently coherent group with the ideological and political resources that might have enthused workers with the confidence they could fight back.

Of course, even if the Left had been stronger and provided such leadership there was absolutely no certainty it could have broken the shackles imposed by objective constraints. There was the problem of sectionalism. There was the problem of the overall acquiescence to 'new realism' within the Merseyside and British labour movement and of convincing workers that militant resistance could be successful despite managerial threats to close the factories down. There was the problem of

attempting to win solidarity action from other plants within the same company to avoid possible isolation and defeat. There was the problem of confronting the cautious preoccupations of full-time union officials. In many respects it is clear, whatever the political complexion of the shop stewards' leadership, the obstacles to a more militant and successful challenge to managerial plans were immense. But to acknowledge the impossibility of building 'socialism in one factory' is not necessarily to reject the possibilities that existed for mounting effective action that could have potentially substantially altered developments, albeit only temporarily.

Moreover, even if the victory of workers could not have been guaranteed at least the nature of the defeats might have been radically different. For example at Bemrose, shop stewards like Barry Caton believed that despite the formidable obstacles it would have been possible for the chapel committees to have made a much better organised tactical retreat (that maintained basic trade union principles intact) on some issues - such as changes in working practices - and dug in their heels on others - such as manning, on the basis of preparing to recoup lost ground whenever opportunities arose or circumstances became more favourable. Thus, whilst he accepted that generating militant resistance to the redundancy package in 1987 was problematic he recognised how a rearguard action over the company's use of TNT transport could have rekindled some confidence, which in turn might have created the momentum for a fightback over jobs. By contrast, stewards such as Joe Barton in Birds Eye saw the need for compromise quite differently, effectively making a virtue out of necessity by stamping out any sparks of workers' militancy, ideologically accepting

the parameters set by management and actively collaborating to win workers' consent to company objectives. Arguably, not only was it unnecessary to have conceded so much ground but the strategy proved ultimately to be self-defeating.

In some respects Joe Barton and Barry Caton personify the difference between a reformist and revolutionary socialist perspective within the workplace. Of course, this distinction is somewhat less sharply polarised in the case of Bobbie Lamb, Jimmy Wilson and some of the quasi-syndicalist stewards but it does help focus attention on the different types of political approach adopted. Clearly, the differences between shop stewards like Joe Barton and Barry Caton revolve not merely around ultimate goals - and whether socialism can be achieved through parliament or not - but also concern day-to-day practical questions of strategy and tactics on the shopfloor. They are reflected in the distinctive approach each has to the struggle for reforms - in demands for better wages, improved working conditions and job security. 'Reformism' of the shopfloor variety is a difficult phenomenon to pin down because it is defined by its internal contradictions. It expresses a complete mixture of opposites, contesting some of the effects of management power - usually through reasoned argument and 'strong bargaining relations' although on occasion through shopfloor mobilisation - whilst simultaneously accommodating to capitalist power in general, by invariably containing protest and opposition within the established 'rules of the game'. Herein lies the essence of reformist workplace trade unionism, namely class collaboration, the attempt to reconcile the antagonistic interests of management and workers, exemplified by Batstone's model of 'sophisticated' shop steward organisation.

By contrast, the revolutionary Marxist shop steward believes the interests of workers and management are incompatible and always attempts to draw the maximum number of workers into militant self-activity and raise the class struggle to its highest possible level, viewing the struggle for reforms as a means by which workers can build the organisation, consciousness and confidence to ultimately overthrow the capitalist system. Only by starting from the self-activity of workers does the fact of shop stewards co-operating to wide-ranging changes in flexibility and the loss of jobs in order to make a factory 'efficient' seem the glaring weakness it really is. The revolutionary Marxist shop steward is concerned above all to build strong workplace organisation and to encourage the development of a combative rank and file on the basis that the more confident workers are the more likely they are to reject managerial ideas and to embrace class-wide, socialist arguments which can help advance both the immediate fightback and the struggle to transform society. In other words, being prepared to acknowledge the need for compromise and retreat in unfavourable objective circumstances but not by hiding or minimising the consequences of this from rank and file workers nor by abandoning attempts to raise the level of resistance and political understanding.

The reason why the distinction between a reformist and revolutionary socialist approach in the workplace is important - even if on specific issues and in particular circumstances different individuals may appear to act in similar ways and notwithstanding the fact that some stewards may sometimes vacillate between the two positions - is because it sharply poses the question as to whether if there had been more Barry

Catons in the three case study workplaces - sizeable and organised groups of revolutionary socialists able to give a co-ordinated lead - it might have been possible for them to have exercised a decisive, and rather more successful, influence on the activities and struggles of shopfloor workers than the Joe Bartons did.

STEWARDS' RELATIONSHIP TO UNION OFFICIALS

Batstone (and Gourlay, 1986) emphasised the mutual interdependence between shop stewards and full-time union officials which ensures there is no real divorce between a 'democratic' workplace union organisation and a 'bureaucratic' official trade union machine. Despite sources of conflict - concerning their contrasting definition of members' interests and responsibilities for achieving objectives - there is broad agreement on general goals and 'trade union principles'. Whilst Hyman has (1979) insisted that presenting the relationship in terms of a dichotomy between 'bureaucracy' (signified by a stratum of full-time union officials) and 'rank and file' (workplace members and their shop stewards) would be absurdly oversimplified it is doubtful whether Batstone would have even accepted Hyman's own more qualified notion of bureaucracy as a set of social relations that permeate the practice of trade unionism.

Clearly, as we have seen, the accommodative and bureaucratic tendencies sometimes identified simplistically with full-time union officials actually operate in different forms and to different

degrees at all levels in the representational structure of trade union organisation - affecting even shop stewards. Nonetheless, the failure (common to many commentators including Roberts, 1976; Kelly, 1988) to acknowledge the existence of a distinct and basically conservative social formation inside the unions - whose material position and social relations provide a set of interests qualitatively different from and opposed to those of the mass of their members - means ignoring some of the most fundamental features of the relationship between shop stewards and full-time union officials. A few general observations can be drawn from the case study material which underline some of the limitations of Batstone's conceptual framework and analysis.

To begin with, there are the underlying dynamic and contradictory tendencies towards independence and dependence which can radically alter the character of stewards' relationship to union officials. Thus, in all three workplaces during the 1970s although there were aspects of both independence and dependence the balance was undoubtedly tilted towards the former. Boraston et al's study (1975) revealed that the larger the workplace organisation the greater the resources at its disposal and the more opportunities for stewards' organisation to acquire skill and experience in handling their own affairs. But the most important factor encouraging a relatively independent relationship to full-time union officials in Birds Eye and Ford's was the high level of shopfloor militancy and the stewards' committee combative approach to management. Such rank and file confidence and activity boosted the strength of stewards' organisation and encouraged the degree of self-reliance and initiative that acted as an important counter-weight to the usually restraining influence of officials.

Chapter Five: Some Conclusions and Lessons

Similarly in Bemrose, although there was little overt shopfloor militancy, the powerful bargaining strength vis-a-vis management underpinned the chapel committees' relatively independent stance towards both branch and national officials. By contrast, in all three plants during the 1930s, economic recession, threats of factory closure and the stewards' co-operative relationship with management sapped shopfloor militancy, undermined stewards' confidence to act independently of the officials and resulted in a more formalised and dependent relationship towards them. Whilst the tradition of acting semi-independently was not entirely lost, the officials' 'new realist' philosophy played a key role in encouraging stewards' to adopt conciliatory bargaining relations with management on the basis that shopfloor militancy had become outmoded and counter-productive in the changed economic and political climate. The Ford stewards' backing for official union scabbing on striking craftsmen in 1990 showed the extent of the dependence.

Nonetheless, it is significant that the shift to the right amongst union officials during the 1980s did, on occasion and over some issues, go so far as to create a gap which could be exploited by militant initiative from below. An example of this was the way union officials concluded a 'final' pay settlement with Ford's in 1988 only to be wrongfooted by rank and file militancy. This created a situation which allowed a minority of shopfloor activists to seize the initiative temporarily. It showed the way in which unofficial action and organisation could begin to emerge when the officials failed to respond to growing anger amongst the members. However, it also showed how such organisation was shaped by the influence of 'new realism' inside the trade union movement.

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This allowed the officials to regain the initiative, switching from opposition to strike action to supporting action, but on their terms and under their control, enabling the officials to defuse the initial surges of militancy and to isolate and demoralise the activists. Nonetheless, it revealed how in the future, it may be possible for workers' struggle to escape the control of officials in ways which a strong and politically orientated stewards' organisation could potentially exploit.

Batstone also failed to acknowledge how the differences of opinion often expressed between stewards and officials are symptomatic of a basic conflict of interests that arises - not because of a tension between the 'pursuit of justice' or 'sectional interest' which causes stress for officials in "managing the job" as Watson (1988) suggests - but because stewards tend to assign primacy to substantive interests - wages, conditions and job security - whilst the officials tend to be much more concerned with procedural issues such as the preservation of stable bargaining relations with management and the organisational interests of the union machine. Thus at Bemrose during the 1970s, this conflict of interests was apparent in the contrast between the SOGAT chapel's ability to use its workplace bargaining strength to win extremely good wages and conditions and the minimal role played by union officials, which had the effect of undermining the officials' *raison d'etre*, authority and self-esteem in the eyes of chapel members (and other union members across the country). Matters were eventually brought to a head in the 1980s over the contrasting attitudes towards shopfloor manning levels and the need for flexible working practices, which resulted in the expulsion of Jimmy Wilson from SOGAT and his removal as FoC. At Birds Eye, the union officials'

instruction to stewards to accept the capitulation terms for a return to work to end management's lock-out in 1977 was another example of a fundamental divergence of interest. At stake for the officials, was the fear of a loss of union membership through plant closure combined with a desire to end a protracted dispute that was embarrassing to the union's credibility. But for the stewards involved, it was a question of attempting to maintain their organisation intact and in as good a shape as possible, even if they were to suffer a major defeat. Again, when the plant was threatened with closure in the late 1980s, although the stewards went along with the officials' muted strategy of resistance it was ultimately them and not the full-time officials who paid the price in terms of losing their jobs.

There were some distinctions between officials at national and local level and between left and right-wing officials. Thus, at Birds Eye the stewards' attitude towards local officials was much less antagonistic than to national officials. Partly, this was because the former, although involved in national union-company bargaining that usually secured poor pay deals, it was merely in an advisory capacity, unlike national officials who tended to play a key role in negotiations. Partly, it was because they were much less physically removed from the stewards' workplace organisation and were usually more susceptible to pressure from the rank and file. Often they were ex-shop stewards who retained close links with the local labour movement. By contrast, national officials were usually more remote and likely to be more concerned with the interests of the union machine. Hence, the Divisional Organiser Dickie Palmer's ambivalent attitude to his union's instruction to return to work to end

management's lock-out. Partly it was because the local official during the late 1970s, Eddie Roberts, was a left-winger who was very supportive of the stewards. But even a sympathetic left-wing local official was no guarantee of the defence of workers' interests, as the stewards' reliance on John Farrell's flawed strategy of opposition to plant closure demonstrated.

Finally, Batstone completely ignored the problem of how shop stewards often need to combat the frequently damaging role of full-time union officials and win workers away from complete reliance on them. In all three workplaces during the 1980s the weight of the official union machinery was consistently placed on the steward organisations to encourage them to collaborate with management efficiency measures. It exposed in sharp relief how building the strength, confidence and independence of workplace union organisation does not mean absolving official union leaders of all responsibility for the conduct of affairs. Unfortunately, although the Left stewards often subjected the officials to sharp criticism they tended not to place concrete demands on them which could have focussed attention on how to take the struggle forward. For example, if the militant stewards at Birds Eye had demanded that John Farrell call for immediate strike action to resist the threat of plant closure it is possible that under pressure he might have responded. The placing of demands on Farrell would have fitted the situation where there was a gap between the widespread anger at the company's plan to shut the plant and the lack of confidence of workers to take the initiative in fighting back. A campaigning lead from the officials could have made a vital difference to the outcome of events, restoring a bit of confidence on the shopfloor and providing the potential basis upon which stewards could have won the arguments for strike action. Even if

Farrell had not responded to such calls for action the making of the demand would have exposed his unwillingness to fight and would have justifiably placed the main responsibility for the defeat not on the rank and file but on ineffectual official union leadership.

Significantly, Spencer's study (1989) of workplace trade unionism in three Liverpool workplaces emphasised the importance of shop stewards' links with the official structures of trade unions to ensure support for any possible action the workplace organisation might wish to undertake. Although he acknowledged that official union pressure can restrict spontaneous strike action - by insisting only 'official' activity should occur - and that the union hierarchy may seek to 'incorporate' stewards into its official structures, he maintained that, as long as stewards can influence union policy and as long as unions are prepared to decentralise some of their decision making, shop stewards are best served by making demands on official union structures whilst simultaneously building horizontal links with other steward organisations. Whilst his analysis has the merit of focussing attention on how pressure can be exerted not only downwards from union officials to stewards' organisation but also upwards, his assumption that steward organisations can continue to provide effective resistance to management by mutually supportive trade union action does not deal with the basically antagonistic structural and ideological linkages between stewards and full-time officials. Unfortunately, he falls into the same error committed by Batstone, namely liquidating the whole concept of bureaucratisation so as to render the term virtually meaningless. Yet not only does this obscure the real conflicts of interest inside the unions it also effectively lets union officials

completely off the hook. Whilst Beynon (1984) is justified in attempting to locate the 'sell out' of union officials within the wider context of the dilemmas of workplace trade unionism under capitalism this should not, as could be implied, mean fatalistically accepting the behaviour of officials and ignoring strategies which, to an important extent, could begin to transcend their limitations.

REASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH

Before proceeding to draw some general lessons from the case study material it is necessary to make a reassessment of my analytical framework and background hypothesis, specifying the limits of generalisation and evaluating the significance of my findings. Firstly, although other commentators pioneered usage of the dualities of conflict and accommodation, democracy and bureaucracy, independence and dependence, within the study of workplace trade unionism (Lane, 1974; Hyman, 1975) I have attempted to deepen and extend this theoretical framework by explicitly employing these conceptual terms within the three-fold categorisation of stewards' relationship to management, rank and file members and union officials to structure the interpretation of my empirical evidence and shape the mode of its written presentation. Arguably, this analytical framework proved a useful tool of research, an explanatory mechanism for conceptualising and understanding the dynamic nature of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness within the three plants.

It could be argued the case studies underlined the need to refine the conceptual understanding of the three dichotomies into a more nuanced view of the relationship between the different elements. Certainly, attempting to conceptualise the world involves an inevitable tendency to oversimplify and distort reality by reducing multiple particularities to a common identity. For example, do shop stewards have an independent or dependent relationship to union officials? In many respects they have both, although instead of discrete positions with clear boundaries there is a continuum of possible and overlapping responses - ranging from complete independence at one end, co-operation in the middle and complete dependence at the other end - depending upon both internal and external pressures to the workplace. Even the basic terms - independence and dependence - have no precise and unambiguous definitions. On the other hand, how far are the costs in terms of oversimplification outweighed by the gains in analytical purchase? (Hyman, 1989b. p146). Although living reality is always richer in development, in complications, than any theoretical concept a clear understanding of the general tendencies at work, based on a clear theoretical analysis, is essential. Even if the case studies exposed the nuances and complexities involved in the conceptual formulations this did not undermine or invalidate the objective of understanding the basic dynamic, the essential contradiction between independence and dependence that lies at the heart of stewards' relationship with union officials. In this sense, it proved useful to adopt the two vernacular terms as a guide to the underlying processes involved. Only from such an essential, albeit simplified, vantage point, did it become possible to evaluate not simply whether stewards adopted an independent or dependent role but what the

balance was between the two and what pressures gave rise to the variations and intensity in stewards' response. Arguably, it was for this reason the dichotomies adopted within the case studies proved an indispensable tool of analysis.

What then of my background hypothesis? I argued that the balance struck between the contradictory tendencies was profoundly affected by the changing balance of class forces. Because the balance of class forces depends upon the general character of the struggle within capitalist society it could not be assessed adequately merely by looking at the balance of bargaining power in a workplace isolated from the wider social, economic and political context in which it is located. Therefore, it was necessary to integrate specific case studies of the nature of shop steward organisation within three workplaces in Liverpool within a general consideration of the changing balance of class forces in Britain. Whilst Batstone was justified in arguing that purely structural analyses fail to take account of the internal dynamics of workplace union organisation he failed to adequately locate these within the external context of historical and social structures. Yet without a broader framework it becomes impossible to assess the durability and limits of 'strong bargaining relations' in any particular workplace. Certainly, it is apparent the circumstances favourable to the institutionalisation of collective bargaining are largely dependent upon the broader context of the political economy in which they are embedded. Nonetheless, the key focus of my enquiry was the specific dynamics of steward organisation, activity and consciousness within three particular workplaces. Whilst I attempted to weave in and take account of the wider external factors - such as the

impact of the major defeats of workers' struggles during the 1980s - necessarily, my main preoccupation was with factors internal to the workplace. Thus, although the 'balance of class forces' provided the broader matrix for analysis my chief focus of interest was the 'balance of bargaining power'. Similarly, my primary focus was on three specific workplaces. The limits of generalisation from the research are discussed below.

Arguably, my research material illustrated how the 'balance of bargaining power' is both an analytical concept (at a level of theoretical abstraction) and a descriptive term (a generalisation of practical reality). The concept provided a theoretical prism through which it became possible to simplify reality into its essential characteristic component. Nonetheless, its use could only be of value when actually applied to concrete material conditions, with all its contradictions and complexities. Only by examining specific workplaces did it become possible to understand which particular factors affect the pendulum of advantage between workers and employers at any particular time and what the balance actually is. An understanding of bargaining power in any particular workplace requires attention to a cluster of internal and external influences and their interaction, including the state of the product and labour markets, state of the economy and level of class struggle generally, the nature of managerial strategy and shop steward leadership and the role of union officials. Similarly, the uneven distribution of bargaining leverage between different sections of workers within the same workplace can be accounted for by a variety of influences, including the nature of work and workers' strategic relationship to production, the degree of

sectionalism between workers and the character of steward leadership.

Such causal influences do not vary independently of each other but tend to operate in a manner which makes it difficult to unravel their separate effects. Of course, the proportional weight of the impact of some variables can vary within a particular workplace. For example, in Ford's and Birds Eye during the 1970s, it appears to have been primarily management's confrontational approach that tended to precipitate militant workplace struggle, which in turn helped shape the relatively strong shop steward organisations that emerged. By contrast, in Bemrose, it was much more workers' strategic relationship to production, the institutionalised pattern of craft job control and the state of the product and labour markets that provided them with powerful bargaining leverage. However, a comparison of the three workplaces showed that, whilst it was necessary to specify the conditions promoting a particular type of stewards organisation, there were significant similarities in the combined interaction of such variables. Certainly, in each of the three case studies the crisis of the product market in the early 1980s stood out as a major element in the equation, affecting the shift from relatively confident shop steward organisations of the 1970s to the much more defensive steward organisations of the 1980s. The recent studies by Terry (1989) and Marchington (1990) have confirmed the manner in which product market pressures serve to align union concerns with management priorities by putting certain pressures on both management and workers, albeit of an uneven nature. This variable provides management with the opportunity to convince workers of the need to make major concessions in working practices as the price of plant survival, although the argument has to be made in

particular circumstances - which however favourable to some outcomes rather than others - is by no means an inevitable process. Thus, my research, whilst exploring both 'structure' and 'action' attempted to focus on a critical, if usually overlooked, variable affecting the balance of bargaining power, namely the nature of shop steward political leadership and its relationship to the level of workers' confidence and self-activity. Whilst Terry (1989) also drew attention to stewards' lack of ideological and political resources in tackling managements' co-operative strategies amidst product market crises he did not make it clear whether this is an inevitable process in such circumstances or, if it is not, what type of political perspective might be appropriate and how it might connect with the dynamics of workplace union organisation.

In a limited microscopic sense, my hypothesis was confirmed by the empirical material on Ford and Birds Eye (and with some qualification on Bemrose). At least in broad terms, it was possible to distinguish between two broad phases of struggle, one of upturn in workers' struggles in the 1970s and one of downturn during the 1980s (although any confirmation of the decline in struggle and erosion of workplace union organisation that characterised the British working class movement generally from the mid-1970s onwards was not discernible). The sapping of workers' confidence to mount an effective fightback against management during the 1980s led to an atrophy of the strong shop steward organisation built up during the 1970s, a weakening of the close relationship between stewards and rank and file members that encouraged a bureaucratisation of workplace trade unionism, and an undermining of stewards willingness to act irrespective of the influence of full-time officials. Yet my empirical

material also confirmed that significant countervailing tendencies continued to operate, which suggested the balance struck between the contradictory tendencies of the shop stewards' position could potentially be reversed (at least in the case of Ford).

Of course, in some respects it was not possible to confirm or deny my hypothesis on the basis of such a narrow focus of three specific workplaces. On the one hand, even if all three case studies had disputed my hypothesis they could have been exceptions to the general rule. On the other hand, even if all three of the case studies had appeared to confirm my hypothesis it would be too narrow a base from which to make sweeping generalisations about its applicability. In reality, there were elements of both confirmation and rejection, as was likely to be the case in any similar limited case study material. But arguably, the most important point was not the hypothesis as such, but the way it helped focus critical attention on some of the underlying features of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness.

Which brings me to the question of the limits of generalisation from the case studies. Clearly, there are important specificities about the results which it would be mistaken to ignore, namely, the way the general balance of class forces in society can potentially affect different groups of workers in varying ways according to the nature of the industry where they are employed, their occupation, geographical location and trade union traditions. Thus, the Merseyside shop steward organisations were far better organised and more militant than those of other plants within the same company (or industry) elsewhere in the country, taking the initiative in setting up a stewards' combine

committee (Ford's), establishing better pay and conditions of work (Bemrose) and often rejecting management pay offers only to be outvoted by their counterparts elsewhere (Birds Eye). In assessing such differences it is necessary to take account of the significance of the economic, political, social and cultural context of Merseyside. It could be argued there are a related set of contributory factors which go some way to explaining the region's distinctive collectivist traditions. My case studies suggest workplace militancy during the 1970s was encouraged by, amongst other things, the relatively deprived economic and social conditions, hard-line combative management and the role of influential militant shop stewards. By contrast, during the 1980s, the downturn in workers' struggle and stewards' more co-operative relationship with management was probably influenced more than anything else by the impact of the economic recession, in a city where manufacturing industry was hit disproportionately hard and where the rate of unemployment remained consistently much higher than the the national average.

Thus, the specificity of the case study material contained in my account - given the important corporate, sectoral and regional variations within any general picture - has to be taken into account. Nonetheless, this does not preclude a level of analytical generalisation being made about the general contours of shop steward organisation, activity and consciousness. In this respect the case studies illustrated the variety of dilemmas faced by shop stewards throughout the British labour movement over the last twenty years. The common themes are of much wider relevance, even if specific conditions need to be constantly borne in mind and the closure of two of the plants in no way makes obsolete

many of the problems examined, over and above any defence of historical analysis in its own right. In fact, the case studies offer lessons not only for an assessment of the past but also for an understanding of contemporary developments and future trends.

Finally, it is necessary to consider some of the problems involved in my research method, the contribution the research has made to an understanding of workplace trade unionism and what further research might be appropriate. Naturally, there were difficulties involved in constructing an account of what were essentially historical events and processes from contemporary oral accounts through a method of interviews, notably attempting to balance a systematic narrative account with a more selective approach of relating key episodes as being 'representative' incidents or particular benchmarks of the general processes involved; and the problem of a selective reconstruction by informants who often held firmly fixed views about the events and the personalities involved. Moreover, there was the problem of the contrast between what informants thought at the time of particular events and what, with the benefit of hindsight they thought at the time I interviewed them. Gaining a critical view of such accounts was absolutely necessary. It meant on the one hand, relying on such key individuals for the invaluable contribution they could make to an understanding of developments, but on the other hand, retaining a questioning stance that was prepared to examine the same issue from the contrasting vantage points of the various individuals involved and placing them in a historical as well as contemporary context. Retaining a critical and independent edge was assisted by the theoretical and political basis from which I approached the research, although the problem of gaining

access to management representatives in Bemrose and Ford's inevitably somewhat narrowed the potential research resource base.

I believe my research provides an important contribution to an understanding of the dynamics of shop steward organisation and the interplay between organisation, activity and consciousness. Given the study of workplace industrial relations during the 1980s suffered a dearth of case studies the rich source of empirical material provided on three workplaces in this account should be a helpful addition to our knowledge of some of the underlying limitations and potentialities of workplace trade unionism which will be of relevance not only to students of industrial relations but also to workplace union activists engaged in the battle against employers during the 1990s. Nonetheless, a great deal of further empirical case study research, focussed on the specific and varied experiences of workplace industrial relations in different industries and localities, is necessary for a more comprehensive picture of the changes and continuities taking place within shop steward organisation. Clearly, studies of particular workplaces where revolutionary Marxists have, or have had, much greater influence than in the case studies above, even if only in an episodic fashion during the course of a strike, would make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the significance of different forms of political influence within the workplace. More detailed consideration of the problematical features of workers' shopfloor organisation - such as 'welt' working, sectionalism and the sexual division of labour - and of the complex relationship between shop stewards and full-time union officials would also be very useful.

REBUILDING STRONG STEWARDS' ORGANISATION

Some general lessons can be drawn from the case study material. Although the basic structure of shop steward organisation at Ford's in the early 1990s remained intact the picture was overlaid by the experience of cumulative defeats which sapped rank and file confidence. The relatively much stronger steward organisation of the 1970s was forged through struggle, small victories which consolidated workplace union organisation, in which the rank and file played an active role. Today, disputes come after years of defeat and demoralisation. Hence, the contradiction between the occasional renewed sparks of workers' militancy and the dominance of the ideas of 'new realism'. This means the job of rebuilding the strength of shop steward organisation, of raising the level of self-confidence and workplace union democracy, is likely to be a long, hard haul, not only in Ford's but inside manufacturing industry and within the British labour movement more generally.

Clearly, the best defence of workers' interests is strong workplace union organisation which, despite the need for compromise, is both willing and able to engage in militant struggle against management. To secure the involvement of their members stewards have to be fully accountable - through full reports of negotiations with management, regular section meetings and mass factory meetings, working alongside the members and avoiding as far as possible 100 per cent time off work. Nonetheless, the real strength of steward organisation will come through workplace struggle. The task must be to restore morale and re-build an organised core

of opposition by putting management regularly to the test within each section, recognising that in the course of struggle it is possible for an active minority to overcome the unevenness in organisation and ideas necessary to lead the passive majority into battle. Every issue has to be approached with the aim of raising the level of rank and file self-activity and increasing the extent to which the fight of a section is generalised to the factory as a whole - whilst constantly looking beyond the factory gate to the struggles of other workers elsewhere. It means recognising that neither relying on union officials (even left-wing officials) nor condemning them out of hand is a substitute for independent stewards' organisation able to use the union leaders when they issue a call for action and to tackle them when they refuse to fight; a strategy of working with the officials at the same time as being prepared, if necessary, to work against them.

The question of political organisation and consciousness is also of paramount importance. So long as the shop stewards' political horizon is limited within the dominant tradition of 'Labourism' their ability to make fundamental advances in workers' interests will be severely hampered. Certainly, Batstone's 'strong bargaining relations' model of shop steward organisation is an essentially 'moderate' reformist perspective which merely serves to reinforce the limitations and compromises of workplace trade unionism within capitalist society. Yet arguably other alternative characterisations of workplace trade unionism also fail to provide a firmly grounded basis for the revitalisation of strong shop steward organisation in the 1990s. For example, Fairbrother's quasi-syndicalist perspective of workplace union democracy and membership

activism (1984; 1987a; 1987b) - represented in all three workplaces by a layer of the most active stewards who tended to separate economics and politics - tends to avoid the issue of how to counter the influence of reformist leaders. Equally, Militant's strategy in Bemrose highlighted the opposite danger, of looking to short-cut solutions - such as concentrating on capturing control of the lower echelons of the union machine and on attempting to make the Labour Party a vehicle for working class advance - to the neglect of independent shopfloor activity and political organisation. Meanwhile, Beynon's celebration of shopfloor militancy (1984) provides no indication of how the shop stewards' 'factory class consciousness' might be broadened into a more 'class conscious' perspective. By contrast, my case study material could be interpreted as signalling, even if provides little explicit positive evidence of, the need for a revolutionary Marxist party which is able to link broad socialist arguments with a practical day-to-day shopfloor strategy that can successfully challenge the influence of reformist full-time union officials and Labour Party leaders and provide an alternative political pole of attraction to workers.

Many commentators who accept the need of broadening workers' political horizon reject the alleged 'workerism' of the British Left and the assumption that workplace 'economistic' militancy is the only valid expression of collective working class experience and action. Thus, Hyman (1989a) has argued that trade unions can never be more than one element in a multiplicity of forms of resistance to capitalism, a resistance which must encompass wider social movements and not simply the sphere of wage labour. Undoubtedly, the revolutionary socialist ideal, as

Lenin put it: "Should not be the trade union secretary, but the tribune of the people, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it effects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of...capitalist exploitation" [1970, p183]. Nonetheless, the main framework through which workers organise against their exploitation within capitalist society is the trade unions and within them shopfloor organisation. Indeed, as Rosa Luxemburg [1970] argued, the industrial struggle is the key cutting edge of socialist politics: "Where the chains of capitalism are forged there they must be broken". From this perspective Hyman's stress on the ideological struggle to convince workers to adopt broad social aspirations and objectives can only be achieved through fighting for influence and leadership in workers' struggles. The one is impossible without the other.

This raises the long debated question of whether socialist consciousness arises from the intervention of socialist parties from outside the workers' movement or the spontaneous generation of revolutionary consciousness inside it through trade union activity (Lenin, 1970; Kelly, 1988). In fact, the case studies suggested how the two elements are involved. Firstly, economic workplace struggles can generalise from the class struggle to produce a sort of consciousness 'from within' - what Beynon called 'factory consciousness' (1984, p108) - which in certain circumstances of heightened class struggle can lead to the politicisation of at least a minority of workers. But even if shopfloor militancy can lead to a political radicalisation of some workers it does not follow that socialist commitment occurs automatically. In fact, many of the most

radical stewards in the case study three workplaces adopted quasi-syndicalist approaches and did not spontaneously free themselves from the influence of Labourism. It is for this reason the alternative ideas of revolutionary socialism have to be introduced by a political organisation independent of the majority of workers. In this sense, revolutionary socialist ideas could be said to come 'from without'. In other words, although apparently contradictory - consciousness from within by spontaneous generation or without by the intervention of independent revolutionary socialist organisation - a dynamic combination of both is vital.

Unfortunately, the experience of Ford's shows that the legacy of the past decade will not be washed away overnight and that the reformist 'strong bargaining relations' approach shared by the majority of shop stewards will act as a brake on the development of future workers' struggles. The difficulty which, even amidst a painstakingly slow revival of confidence, the old traditions of sectionalism and reliance on union officials will cause socialist militants who try to capitalise on workers' resistance will be a recurring element. But it is possible that during the 1990s the mood of bitterness against the previous years of tightening labour discipline vented through small struggles could provide revolutionary socialists with a few inches more elbow room to gain the sort of influence that could play a decisive role in the long term.

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